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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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FINAL SECRETS**

by Brendan
DuBois

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GUEST EDITORIAL

by
Brian Cox

Imagination . . . truly an incredible thing. Albert Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge," and while that's a mighty strong statement, it is true that it's difficult to overrate a thing as wonderful and powerful as imagination.

It is the need to imagine and express that is the driving force, the backbone, of the Mysterious Photograph's success and popularity. In the years since the first photograph appeared back in the August '82 issue of AHMM, there have been nearly seventy Mysterious Photographs and roughly fifteen thousand submissions: that's a lot of imagination compressed into two hundred and fifty words. It's not easy. If you've tried, you know; if you haven't tried, you should, and then you'll see how difficult it can be. In fact, for some authors the contest has proved to be a training ground of sorts. Several winners have later published full length stories in the magazine:

James A. Noble; Robert Gray; William F. Smith; Nancy Pickard and B. Newton, both of whom have stories in this issue. Then there are J.F. Peirce, Richard Ciciarelli, and Ellane Caveney Michael, all of whom actually published in AHMM some time *before* winning, which just goes to show the Mysterious Photograph's challenge doesn't appeal only to beginners. More Mysterious Photograph winners and honorable mentions will surely join them.

Now, what makes a photograph a Mysterious Photograph? I ask simply because I don't know. Sometimes the picture is so simple, so straightforward that it doesn't seem fair to expect readers to write a short-short based on it. And yet these simple, straightforward photographs are the ones that seem to bring in the most humorous, ingenious entries. Is it because the less the picture portrays, the greater the demand on the imagination to *create*, not merely explain? Again, you

got me. All I know is that Mysterious Photographs are not graphic, not bloody, not screams, horrors, and monsters. No, they are footfalls, whispers, shadows; they are puzzling and intriguing. They are not loud and abrasive, but secretive, seductive. They do not repel, they invite. They are not attackers in the night, they are fingers beckoning from dark hallways.

Finding these photographs is a challenge unto itself. We are always looking, flipping through books of collected photographs, searching for that mysterious quality, for photographs that invite.

And it's difficult to express what it is we're looking for. "Well," we say, "we'll know it when we see it." But it has

occurred to us that maybe some readers will also know it when they see it, and if you happen to be one who thinks he knows it and has seen it, then why don't you send us a Xerox of it and we'll see if we can possibly use the picture as a Mysterious Photograph. It is important, by the way, to know where you found the photo, the book and publisher for instance, and who the photographer is, so that we can get permission and a print of the photograph.

Our readers have shown limitless and varied imagination in their contest entries, but have they gotten a handle on the elusive essence of the Mysterious Photograph itself? Maybe now we'll have a chance to discover that answer.

Brian Cox is the Associate Editor of AHMM.

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FICTION

Final Marks, Final Secrets

by Brendan DuBois

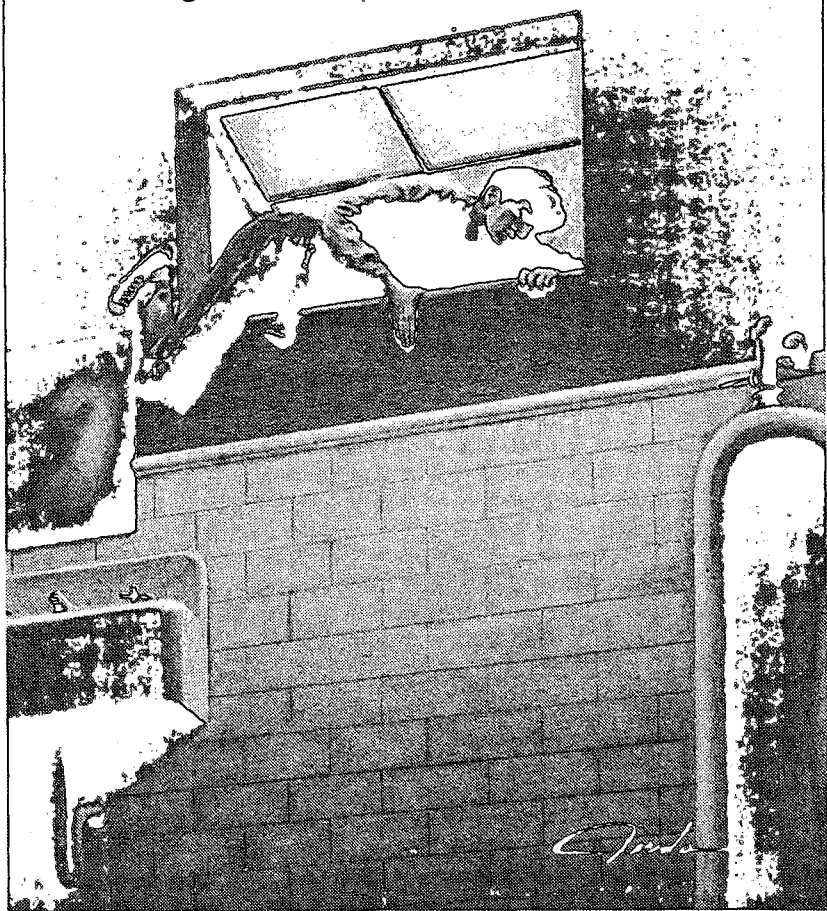


Illustration by Joe Jereda

It started again, a month after I married my wife Annie. We were in our new apartment in a small North Shore town outside of Boston, and we were playing a game newlyweds probably think up all the time. It was Annie's idea and though I smiled and played along with her, it felt like a cold ice cube was being run up and down my back.

The game was called "Secrets," and we went back and forth, telling each other past secrets we had kept from our families and our friends, but not from ourselves. No, not that, at least. We were in the living room and the sliding glass door to the deck was open, and I saw fireflies dance and blink over the Bellamy River as we played. I looked away, suddenly not liking the door being so open. Strawberry daiquiris in hand and candles on an oak dining table, we talked the night away. Annie had just told me of a time when she was seventeen and had spent the night in Boston, partying, when she was supposed to be with a high school friend. And before that, I had told her about my first and only shoplifting offense, when I was twelve and stole a *Playboy* just for a chance to see what was hidden behind those glossy covers.

I took a leisurely sip from my frozen strawberry drink, which was in a delicate and long glass, one of the countless wedding gifts from nameless aunts or uncles that cluttered our apartment. I wondered how long it would take before "Uncle Ray's table" became our table, and I wondered how long before the game was over. But in the candlelight Annie's blue eyes were laughing at me.

"C'mon, Lew, it's your turn for a secret," she said. "You know secrets aren't healthy for a modern marriage."

The flickering light made her blonde hair sparkle and looking at her I had a warm feeling that everything, at long last, was right. I had met the right woman, I had made the right choices, and things were going to be perfect. Annie was a layout artist for an advertising company in Boston, while I was a wire editor for one of the city's two largest newspapers. I had gone many miles to get here, and I hoped I was happy.

"Sorry," I said. "My life isn't that sordid. I'm squeaky clean; even your parents think so."

She stuck out her tongue. "Maybe, Lew, but your parents told me a few secrets. Especially your mother."

The ice cube was back. "My mother?"

"Right." Annie picked up her matching glass and took a long swallow, and put her drink down. A breeze from the river made

the candles flicker. She gave me an arch look with her eyebrows. "Your mother. About the time you were at that Catholic high school and forged your report card."

I tried to smile but I failed. I picked up my glass and there was a sharp *crack* and my hand felt suddenly cold and then warm. Annie screamed and I looked down, and part of the shattered glass was still in my hand. The dull pink of the frozen strawberry was dripping down my wrist, joined by the shockingly bright red of something else. Good God, I thought. He's come back.

Lewis Callaghan was fourteen years old and was certain of one thing—by tomorrow, Saturday, he would be dead.

He slouched low in his classroom seat, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, though it felt like a spotlight was trained on him. Like every other male in St. Mary's High School in North Manchester, he wore black shoes, black pants, a white shirt, and a blue necktie with S.M.H.S. in gold thread in the center. The windows were open for the first time that year, promising spring with a warm breeze and the smell of wet earth, but he could only concentrate on one thing—what he held in his sweaty hands.

It was a folded piece of white cardboard, with the school seal on the outside and his handwritten name and "Grade 9" underneath it. Inside were columns listing school subjects and inside the report card was his death warrant.

He sank lower in his seat.

A few hours ago he had watched Sister Juanita, sitting behind her large wooden desk in her flowing black and white habit, as she reached into a side drawer and came up with the blank report cards for that semester. She had slowly transferred the marks for each student from a leather-bound ledger on her desk to the blank cards, and once she had looked up at him and glared at Lewis with those cold blue eyes of hers. At that look his heart felt like stone. He was dead.

Lewis opened the report card just a bit, ashamed of what was in there, not wanting anyone else to see the scarlet mark. History, B+. Geography, B. English, A. Religion, A. French, B. And Algebra, F.

F.

His hands felt dirty. God, he had never gotten a D in his life, never mind an F. His parents were away visiting his aunt and uncle in Rhode Island and were due back tomorrow, and that was

the day he was going to die. He was sure of it. Up on the pale green wall, over the clock that said he had ten minutes left of the school day, was a crucifix. He said a Hail Mary, remembering the miracles he had read about in religion class. Please God, just this once.

He opened the card again. It still said F.

Around him the other students—the boys dressed like him, the girls in their plaid skirts and blazers—doodled in notebooks or read. He heard someone whisper at the back of the class and Sister Juanita looked up as the whispering stopped. He felt like shaking his head as he looked at his classmates. He wasn't really close to any of them. They seemed so . . . silly, though that really wasn't a good word. It was just that Lewis had it all planned, knew exactly where he was going, and these kids were satisfied with what they had, happy at the thought of living in North Manchester the rest of their lives.

But not Lewis, he thought. As long as he could remember he had always gotten A's in English and he was counting on that to take him places after high school and college. He wanted to be a newspaper reporter, talk to governors and astronauts, presidents and criminals, and see his name on the front page of a big newspaper. This summer one of his cousins in Rhode Island had gotten him a job as a copy boy at the *Providence Journal*. Mom hadn't been so crazy about the idea of his spending a summer away from home, but Dad thought it was great. A summer working at a real newspaper, watching the giant presses roll out newspapers still damp with ink, and knowing the people who put those words on paper. It seemed like a dream.

The final bell rang and he mechanically put the report card in the center of his history book and went out to the hallway, picking up his corduroy coat along the way. Yep, a dream all right. F, F, F. Once his parents saw that, so long summer job. And who knew if Cousin Paul would be able to arrange that copy boy job again.

His hands felt grimy from handling the report card so he went to the basement, where the lavatories were. The boys' bathroom was empty and he washed his hands in one of the large, dirty porcelain sinks. Over the sinks were large windows cranked open with a hand wheel, and the center one was open. In spite of it all he smiled at the sight. Poor Mr. Flaherty still hadn't gotten that window fixed, despite how many complaints from Sister Alicia, the principal.

The basement of the school held storage rooms, the nurse's office,

a jumble of old desks and chairs, and the boiler room, where Mr. Flaherty held court. Lewis stopped outside the boiler room, jacket slung over one arm. The door was open and along a short brick-lined hallway was a row of trashcans. One of the prized chores in school was dumping the classroom wastebaskets because it meant a trip to the boiler room and a chance to talk to Mr. Flaherty. And if he was in a good mood, he'd let you dump the trash right into the incinerator, which was at the end of the brick hallway. That door was also open and Lewis watched the roaring of the flames and the red and orange glow of the coals. That must be what Hell looks like, he thought. Spending forever there, with the coals against your skin, burning and burning.

Mr. Flaherty stepped out from his workroom, which led off from the hallway. He wore dark green chino workpants and shirt, and his hands were browned and permanently stained with grease. He was almost completely bald and his black-rimmed glasses were held together with masking tape.

Before he spoke Lewis could smell him, smell the thick odor of mouthwash. "You need something?" he demanded.

Mr. Flaherty was not in a good mood. Lewis thought quickly for a moment and said, "The window in the boy's bathroom still won't close."

The janitor snorted in distaste. "That nun principal send you down on that? Let me tell you, kiddo, bad enough I spent twelve years learning from the likes of her, now I have to work for her, too. Now you run along, 'fore I take a hand to you."

He ran along.

At home his older brother Earl had left a note, saying he would be out with friends that night. Drinking, no doubt. Lewis didn't care. Their parents wouldn't be back until tomorrow.

He rambled through the empty house and in the kitchen he ate some chocolate chip cookies and drank a glass of milk. He sat on a high wooden stool and through the kitchen window he watched the sun set out beyond the dull brown hills that ringed North Manchester. Occasionally he glanced over at the small wall clock and checked the time. Five P.M. Six ten P.M. Six thirty P.M. The minutes were sliding away. He looked over at the counter where Mom made her Italian dinners and pizza or fish every Friday night. The dull white report card sat in the middle of the counter, mocking him.

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Maybe, he thought, maybe we could tell Mom and Dad we lost the report card. Or the nuns couldn't find it and would give him a new one on Monday. It might work.

He slapped his hands with disgust on the counter and walked out the back door to the rear lawn. Sure. It'd work. But only for a couple of days. And what would those be like? Skulking around the house, wondering if his parents believed him, wondering if maybe they'd call up the convent to complain or double-check. And then it would be worse; much worse, if they found out that deceit.

Lewis sat down on the stone steps and drew up his knees to his chin. He felt like he was six. He was panicking, his chin was trembling, and his eyes were teary. And over what? An ink mark on a piece of cardboard. That was all. He took a deep, shuddering breath, and thought, yeah, that's all. He imagined Mom and Dad coming home tomorrow. Looking at the report card. The tense looks. The yelling. Maybe even a slap or two across the face. Then the phone calls. One to the school, demanding to know how he screwed up. And one to Cousin Paul, canceling the summer job. All because of one lousy mark.

The night air was still warm, strange for March. Stars were starting to appear against the dark sky and the color reminded him of Sister Juanita's habit. He recalled how she reached into her bottom desk drawer, pulling out the blank report cards and filling in those marks, and he remembered wondering, which one of those will be mine. Which one of those will bear that damnable F. He shook his head and tightened his grip on his knees, and the smell of the school soap on his hands made him think of something, of something in the boys' bathroom, and in a very few minutes he had locked the house and was walking back into town.

This sure is crazy, he thought, huddled against the cold brick of St. Mary's High School. And all because of algebra. Something about it never clicked with him. He could understand numbers all right, multiplication and division and fractions. But letters instead of numbers? X's and Y's? It was like part of his brain was dead, that it couldn't even begin to grasp the meaning or basic function of algebra. So he had gone from a B to a C and now, that blasted F.

The wind picked up, stirring dust and dead leaves from last year around his feet. He was at the rear of the school, in the fenced-in asphalt lot where gym and recess were held. In front of him were

three windows, and the middle one moved easily enough in his hands. All he had to do was swing himself in, put his feet on the bathroom sink, and he'd be in. Clipped to his belt was an old Boy Scout flashlight. And then . . .

He turned around again. God, can I do this? Will I go to Hell? Not only are we trespassing, we're stealing and lying. Because inside the school was Sister Juanita's desk, and it would be easy enough, yes, so easy, to steal a blank one and forge a new card. One with a C in algebra instead of an F. Forge it and give it to his parents tomorrow, apologize for not doing better. Get some good-natured kidding from Dad, and on Sunday, forge Dad's signature on the real card, pass it in, and start working like the Devil himself to do better next semester.

Against the brick wall his hands were trembling. It was very dark and there had been hardly any traffic on the short walk to the school. Up and over. That's all it would take. Or face parents tomorrow with the real thing, and spend a summer here instead of Rhode Island. He tried deep breathing to calm the trembling but instead it made his head dizzy. Such a small town. It only took a few minutes to walk from one end to another, and it wasn't for him. He imagined living in a big city, bigger than Manchester or Boston, where it was hard to sleep at night because of the traffic and the music. He wanted that so bad it was almost something he could grab. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine Hell again, the burning coals and fire, but all he saw was the red of the mark. F.

He flipped down the window and clambered inside, reaching out with his feet to the sink. His feet flailed in the empty air and he started sliding on his stomach on the window, banging his chin in the process, and he bit his tongue. He almost cried out, imagining falling to the cement floor and breaking a leg, but one foot touched the sink and in a few seconds he was there.

The bathroom was dark and there was a sharp odor of chemicals. Mr. Flaherty must've cleaned it before leaving. He touched the flashlight on his belt and rubbed at his chin. A scratch was there, one that stung, and he looked up at the window. Could he make it back up there when he was done? He touched the cold porcelain of the sink. He'd have to. There was nothing else left. In the lavatory another sink was dripping, the loud noise sounding like a series of gunshots.

He stood at the doorway, wondering why his legs were shaking so. This is stupid, he thought. We've been down here dozens of

times, hell, *hundreds* of times before. Why the shaking legs? Why the dry mouth which wouldn't go away? Why did his hands itch, as if they wanted a gun or a club to hold? To his right were the stairs and to the left were the piles of furniture, storage rooms, and the boiler room. God, I'm so scared, and it was because of the time and place. During the day when there was light and hundreds of other kids here, the school seemed to be alive. Now it was so dark it almost hurt his eyes to squint, and the only sounds were from dripping water and the occasional creak or groan from the pipes.

Can a school be haunted?

Lewis started up the stairs, a hand gliding along the cold metal of the bannister. He noticed the dusty smell of the school—the dirt, the chalk dust, the sweat from all the kids roaming around during the day. The stairs were gritty from dirt and he was halfway up the first flight when the noise made him freeze and grab onto the bannister with both hands.

Below him a door had slammed.

He forced himself to look. Below and at the other end of the basement a red glowing light was coming out of an open door, and the bannister was sweaty in his hands as he tried to imagine what was there. A fire? The Devil? Some footsteps echoed out and the door closed, and he heard muttered cursing as Mr. Flaherty stepped out and slowly walked up the other stairs. Oh Lord, Lewis thought. Mr. Flaherty's still here and he's drunk. And he had heard whispered stories out in the playground about Mr. Flaherty's temper when he was drunk. He tried not to move but his arms were shaking as he watched Mr. Flaherty ascend the other stairs, his way lit by streetlights from outside. Lewis let out a breath of air when he heard another slam. The door outside. Mr. Flaherty must be outside. That's all.

The lavatory was still there, with the open window that led out. And out there was a real report card, with a real failing grade. He started back up the stairs.

At the first floor corridor he saw he didn't need his flashlight. The outside streetlights lit up enough of the interior but when he started up the hallway, hugging close to the wall, something struck his face and he stopped, listening to a clattering noise that seemed to go on forever. He reached up and touched a swinging coat hanger which his head had struck. Idiot, he thought. Let's make some more noise. He waited a few more minutes and then kept on going down the hallway, but this time he stayed in the middle. His heart was

pounding so hard he couldn't make out the individual beats. The sound was one giant roar that filled his ears.

The door to Sister Juanita's classroom was partially opened and he slowly opened it farther, the creaking of the hinges echoing in the room. The room and the rows of desks seemed smaller in the nighttime, less real, like it was all a bad dream. Sister Juanita's desk was in the far corner, the American flag next to it, and the blackboards seemed like polished stone in the faint light. His chest felt as if it was going to burst and he licked his dry lips as he walked across the classroom floor. At every step a floorboard creaked.

At the desk he wondered what Sister Juanita might do if she found him here. If she came in right now, habit swishing and flowing, the rosary beads clicking, switching on the overhead lights. What would she do? Grab him by the hair, no doubt, and hit him a few times. Call home and maybe speak to his older brother Earl, or even demand the phone number of his aunt and uncle in Rhode Island. He wiped his hands on his jacket and leaned forward, not quite believing he was actually going to go through Sister Juanita's desk. It was stealing.

But his hand moved forward anyway, touching the polished wood of the lower desk handle. He tugged at it and the drawer wouldn't budge. He tugged again, harder, and then knelt down and used both hands.

Damn! He sank forward on his knees. The drawer was locked. He jerked at it a few times, his hands finally slipping off the handle in the effort. It was locked, and he had done all of this for nothing. Tomorrow he was still going to be dead. This time he sat down against the desk and drew up his knees and cried into his hands, muffling the tears with his coatsleeve, the musty smell no comfort at all.

In a while he was done, his face dried, his eyes watery and aching from the sharp sting of his tears. He was about to get up and slink downstairs when he tried to remember one thing, what Sister Juanita did every morning. She would sweep into class and nod at the kids, her books and ledger in her gnarled hands, and then she'd sit down, open the center desk drawer, and then . . .

Still on his knees, he moved over to the center drawer, pushing her swivel chair out of the way. He tugged at the center drawer and it slid easily out, and from inside the desk there was a click,

as a mechanism of some sort was released. He tried again with the lower drawer and it came out with no problem at all.

The flashlight was in his hands and the strong light made him blink. Inside the drawer were pencils, pens, an ink pad, two black-board erasers, a pile of envelopes, and there, almost at the bottom and bound with an elastic band, the blank report cards. His prize. He gently pulled one free and replaced everything in the drawer, and then closed both drawers shut, also moving the swivel chair back. He put the blank report card down his shirt, and even though it was cold and scratchy on his skin, it felt wonderful. He was going to make it.

And he was halfway out of the classroom when the voice came. "Hey, you! Stop that!"

He closed his eyes. Caught. He couldn't move, waiting for the hand on his shoulder, the slap on the face, the fingers tugging at his ear. The failure and now all of this. He should have stayed home, for what could he ever do now? He started praying but instead of the formal Hail Mary or Our Father, he just said, Oh Lord, over and over.

The voice came again, louder. "Stop that, now!" He opened his eyes. He was still alone in the room. The voice was coming from outside. Without knowing why he was doing so, he walked over to the row of windows, just above the bright gray of the radiator. One window was still open and he looked down through the screen, at the fenced-in yard where he had been a hundred hours ago. The corner streetlight cast an odd glow over the asphalt and Mr. Flaherty was there, a bottle in one hand, his other hand raised. He wasn't alone. Two young men were in front of him, laughing and poking at him with their hands. They had long hair and both wore dungaree jackets. Lewis held his breath. No one could see them from the street. Only Lewis was watching. Mr. Flaherty tried to stumble away and the men were with him.

One said, "C'mon, Curt, grab the bum's wallet and let's screw."

Mr. Flaherty turned. "No, you won't," and he brought the bottle down on Curt's shoulder. The young man yelped and cursed and Lewis bit his lip, trying not to scream, trying not to cry out. Suddenly Mr. Flaherty was sitting on the asphalt, his legs splayed out, both hands clasped to his chest.

"Here," the young man said, reaching out with a hand, the streetlight glittering sharply on what was there, and he punched Mr. Flaherty twice in the chest again. He coughed and in an instant

the two men were running away, heading for the street. They both turned in unison, as if they were brothers, and looked back at Mr. Flaherty, self-satisfied grins on their young faces.

Lewis held onto the wooden windowsill with both hands, not moving. Below him Mr. Flaherty sat on the asphalt, stock still, hands at his chest. Then Mr. Flaherty started weaving slightly, from side to side, and he slowly rolled over to the hard surface of the asphalt, as if he was suddenly exhausted. A leg twitched, and then he was still.

Out on the deck later that night I sat and looked out at the stars, and I tried not to look at the back yard, which fell towards the slow moving Bellamy River. I tried to keep my gaze up at the stars, trying to remember the constellations, but like so many things I failed at it. My right hand throbbed with a dull ache where an emergency room doctor had cleaned and stitched my wound. There was a taste of dead ashes in my mouth, despite the half-drunk bottle of beer in my hand. What Annie had said brought it all back.

I never mentioned it to anyone, not even the police. How could I explain what I was doing in school at that time of the night? The forgery had gone on, I had gotten that summer job and others, and I had gotten here, to where I wanted to go so bad. But it never had been like I had planned. At some points in my life, like my high school and college graduations, at my first newspaper job and the time I won a journalism award two years ago, I could never quite enjoy what I had achieved. It was always spoiled by the thought of how I had gotten there, over the corpse of Mr. Flaherty. At those times when I was supposed to be happy, and when I had a little too much to drink, I always imagined I saw someone just stepping out of a door, or ducking behind a group of people. And this someone would always be wearing faded green chinos.

Annie came out, sitting next to me, a soft hand on my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Not bad," I said, trying to keep my tone light. "We ought to call your Aunt Mary and complain about those glasses."

"Maybe so," she said, and her voice was low.

We sat there for some minutes, until I couldn't stand it any more, and I said, "What did Mom say about my report card? She's never mentioned it to me, not ever."

Annie shrugged her shoulders. "She told me at my bridal shower

that you were her best-behaved son, except for that report card your freshman year. Some nun had talked to her at a school function, congratulating her on making you work harder. I guess you went from an F to a B in one semester."

Which was true. "That's right."

"And that was the first time she had ever heard about it, but by that time you were in Rhode Island and she never bothered to bring it up. Your mom gave me the idea she thought it was kinda funny."

My throat was dry, despite the beer. Kinda funny. "Oh."

She touched my shoulder again, a soft flicker. "What happened, back then? It really bothered you, didn't it?"

I looked over at Annie and thought, well, maybe it's time to tell someone what happened back then. Maybe it was time to stop the lies. In her eyes I saw a look of love and concern, and I knew it was for a man she thought she knew everything about. And what would my wife then think, if she knew how I stood there and watched a man bleed to death, for a report card mark? I had wanted a wife like Annie all my days, but some secrets would always have to stay secrets.

"What's wrong?" she softly asked again.

The night air seemed cooler and my hand still ached.

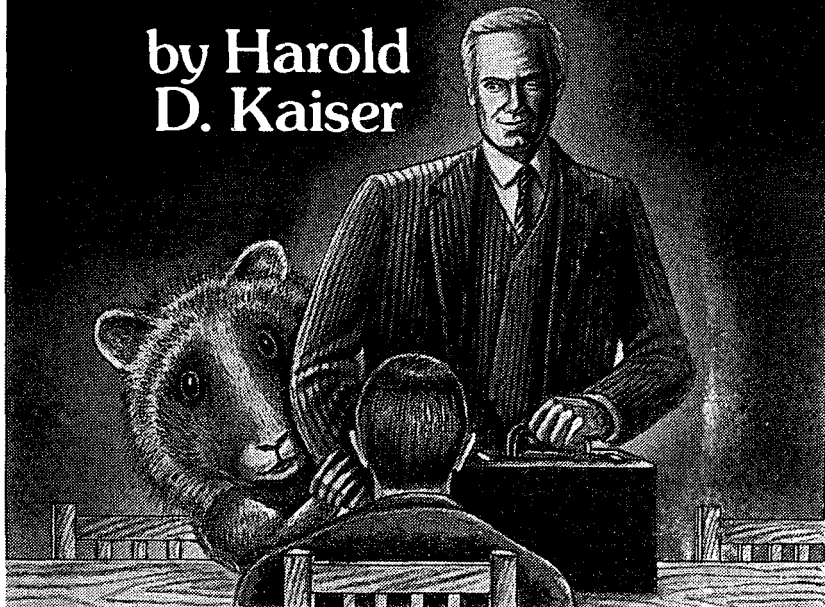
"Nothing," I said, lying for the first time as a married man. I took a drink from my beer and looked down at the bushes and the yard out beyond the deck, and in the darkness I thought I saw someone move.

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Scamsters

by Harold
D. Kaiser



Anyone who thinks all federal prisons are country clubs has never been a "guest" of Yuma Federal. I had been one for six months and still had not got used to the heat. Or the subtle, all-pervasive stench of underwashed bodies and sullen souls. And I still had nineteen years to go.

So when one of the Amazons who were the new wave of guards banged on my cell door and growled that my lawyer

wanted to see me, I was at the door before she even got it open. Maybe the incompetent had finally had second thoughts about an appeal.

She quick-marched me through the stagnant corridors to the cubicle where the lawyers were allowed privacy with their clients, shoved me through the door, and snarled at the man inside, "When you're done, push the buzzer."

The man inside wasn't the seedy little weasel whose inept

defense had landed me here. This guy had carefully combed silvery hair, a three martini complexion, and wore a six hundred dollar suit. He gave me a politician's smile and said in a deep, mellow voice, "Hello, I'm Roger Dunbar, your new attorney." Sweat was starting to bead his upper lip and the armpits of his jacket would never be the same again. "You sure don't have to worry about freezing to death in here." He held out his hand for me to shake.

I took it very cautiously.

He cranked up the smile a notch.

"Relax, I'm here to help you."

I eyed him warily.

"Pull the other one. You're one of them."

The smile cut out and he looked nervously around the room.

"What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean. One of those friggin' aliens."

"Aliens? Why would you say a silly thing like that?"

"You shimmer around the edges—just a little, but I can see it. Just like the other one did."

He looked more embarrassed than alarmed. "I'm really not used to radiating all the time." Then his eyes widened. "You mean that the hypnoshield doesn't affect you completely?"

"I guess not, whatever the hell a hypnoshield is. Right now you look like Melvin Belli, F. Lee Bailey, and a few others all rolled into one. But you shimmer a little around the edges. Just like the other one did, the one I saw coming out of that federal platinum vault with the guards smiling at him like it was all kosher. Then he spotted me and before I knew what was happening he was gone, the platinum was gone, alarms were ringing all over the place, and the two big guards were sitting on me. The bastard set me up. I'd like to meet him again."

"That's why I'm here. How would you like to get out of here and at the same time get even with the one who put you here?"

Hope reared its deceptive head, but I played it cool.

"How do I know I can trust you? After all, one of you put me here."

He shrugged. "How do I know I can trust you? After all, the only reason you spotted Mikas was that you were casing the joint yourself."

"Mikas—so that's the little rat's name!"

"He's a Vorner. From Vorn. Out there." He waved at the ceiling. Then he bowed. "I'm Moukas, also a Vorner."

"Vornor, schmornor. You look like four foot tall hamsters to me."

Moukas started and his eyes narrowed. "How do you know what we really look like?"

"I told you. I saw your Mikas. When he was cleaning out the platinum vault. He didn't know I was there at first. It sure as hell gave me a start, seeing a four foot tall hamster pushing a cartload of platinum. Then all of a sudden he turned into a shimmery human. I knew he was some kind of weird alien or I was having a monumental case of DT's. When the guards started sitting on me, I knew it wasn't DT's."

Moukas stared thoughtfully at me. "Would you recognize this Vorner if you saw his real form again?"

"Naw, probably not. It was just a glimpse and then, wham, I was in the same dream world that the rest of them were in."

"But you didn't forget what you had already seen."

"That's right. But what the hell, all four foot tall hamsters look alike to me."

He was silent for a minute, then the smile came back.

"You never told the police about Mikas' true appearance. You just gave them a description of the human form he assumed. How come?"

"How come? Are you kidding? It was bad enough when I gave them the description of a human that ten other people swore they had never seen, much

less trying to convince them it was really a king-sized hamster who stole their platinum. It wouldn't be federal prison, it would be federal nuthouse. Although, come to think of it, it would be easier to get out of the nuthouse."

"Which brings us back to why I'm here. I am roughly what you would call a detective in our own system. Mikas is a criminal."

"No! Not really!"

"We don't have many," Moukas said defensively. "He is only the fourth one in about a thousand of your years. A slight mishap in his gene patterning that wasn't detected until we went over the records after his first crime. I've been chasing him over half this galaxy for the past fifty years. Finally, I traced him to this planet."

"How did you do that?"

"I have my methods," he smirked. "When I read about your rather peculiar defense—which was quite well publicized—"

"Yeah, as a how-could-anyone-be-so-stupid kind of thing."

"Yes. Well. Anyhow, I suspected Mikas' fine furry paw. So I decided to pose as your new lawyer, working on an appeal, to get in to see you."

"You seem to know a lot about our legal system."

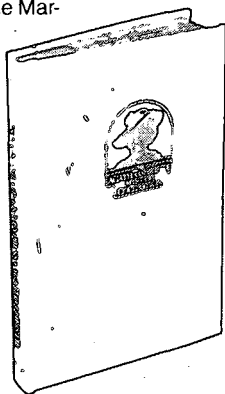
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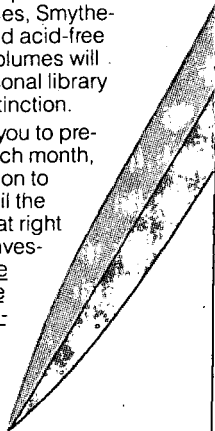
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the last thirty of your years. I watch many of your newscasts and crime shows, as they are more or less in my field. Sometimes it's hard to tell one from the other. Also, that is why I speak such good English with many fine idioms." A tinge of pride crept into his voice.

"So what's the bottom line?"

"Bottom? Oh. I want you to help me catch Mikas."

"Me? How do you figure I can help you? In fact, why do you need my help?"

"Because there are certain things I am not allowed to do. Certain restrictions placed on me by my government."

"Such as?"

"Well, for one thing, I'm not allowed to let the fact that I'm alien to this planet become known."

"You blew that one. I know it."

Moukas grimaced. "From your rather confused statements when you were arrested, I suspected you might have a faint idea—but I didn't know you could actually detect us—I was going to try—" He shuddered. "Man, if you only knew the trouble I'm going to have with those damn bureaucrats back on Vorn when they find this out. The paperwork—" His voice trailed off helplessly, and he pulled out a soggy handkerchief and mopped his face.

"I'm going to have to catch

Mikas. It is the only way I can get out of this."

I was intrigued. "Tell me, are you really doing that or is it just your image?"

"Huh? What?"

"When you mop your face like that. Are you really doing it or am I just seeing your image doing it?"

He looked at the soggy handkerchief.

"Oh. Well—it's sort of hard to explain. You see, I can make you see me doing anything I want you to but don't really have to be doing it. But that takes conscious effort on my part. The rest of the time, things just go along under sort of a principle of equivalency. When I do something, you may not see exactly what I do, but may see the equivalent human gesture. For example, the human reaction to bureaucratic harassment is often profuse sweating and subsequent mopping of the face. On the other hand, the Vorni, under equivalent stress, tend to emit—"

"Okay, okay. I don't need a lecture on comparative whatever. Let's get back to basics. How am I supposed to help you?"

Moukas looked hurt for an instant and then shrugged.

"Right. Look—I can't go bouncing around this planet looking for Mikas. He could either lie low or leave before I

caught up with him. Besides, it's very possible that you're not the only one who can detect us. Even so, keeping up a hypno-shield for long periods of time is exhausting. So I want you to help me set up a—what do you call it when you deceive—”

“A scam?”

“Scam. Right. Which will make Mikas come to us so I can arrest him.”

“And how do you propose getting me out of here so I can help you? You going to hypnotize the warden and the guards into believing I was never here?”

“Heavens, no. That would be much too involved. Besides, there are too many records that say you are here. Sooner or later someone would read one of them and start wondering what became of you.

“No, I'm going to do exactly what I told the warden I was looking into. I'm going to get you out on bail pending an appeal. All I need for that is some slightly gullible judge whom I can talk into believing a point of law is somewhat different from the way it really is.”

“That shouldn't be too tough. We have ordinary lawyers who do that all the time.”

“Even better. Will you help me?”

I leaned back and thought about it. This whole thing made me feel slightly uneasy. I am as

true blue a human as the next guy, and the thought of teaming up with an oversized alien hamster to pull a scam, even on another oversized alien hamster, who in addition was a rat, made me feel— On the other hand, spending twenty years in this dump didn't intrigue me very much, and when I had mentioned appeal to my real lawyer, he had just laughed and walked away, shaking his head. If this rodent could get me out, I could play it by ear afterwards. Who knows?

“Okay, you got a deal. What kind of scam are you thinking about? It had better be damn good. Once through the meat grinder is enough for me.”

Moukas frowned and stared off into space.

“I really hadn't thought that one out completely.” He smiled. “On the other hand, between the two of us we should be able to come up with something great. And you will be in the clear. Trust me.”

“Yeah, sure. And if we pull it off, then what?”

“Pardon?”

“I'll be out pending appeal on a phony technicality. That doesn't leave me much.”

“Oh, that. Not to worry. When I get hold of Mikas I know I can persuade him to remove his mind block on those witnesses so they'll realize you are not the

culprit and clear you. We will also return the platinum. No problem.

"Look, I'll go set up the appeal thing and you should be out of here in a couple of days. In the meantime, see if you can think up some possibilities for a scam we might use."

He gave his face a final mop with the handkerchief, winked at me, and buzzed to be let out. The Amazon came in and quick-marched me back to my stifling cell. I stretched out on my bunk for some deep thinking.

The more I thought about it, the less I liked it. Mikas had, with little apparent effort, lined me up for twenty years in the slammer and had vanished with several million dollars' worth of Uncle Sam's finest platinum. In fact, it was the vanishing of the platinum along with my "refusal to cooperate" in handing it back that had got the judge in the book-throwing mood when time came for sentencing. Now, with the help of one of his fellow aliens whom I really knew nothing about, I was supposed to pull off a brilliant scam which would result in his capture. For all I knew, Moukas could be one of the dumbest hamsters in the universe, including the Earth variety. After all, his statement that he had been chasing Mikas for fifty years and had not

caught him did not do much to inspire confidence.

On the other hand, the alternative was not particularly pleasant either. Up to twenty years in the government's prize hell-hole and then when I did get out being bugged night and day by various nasties still looking for the loot.

But the scam. How do you scam an alien whose psychology you know nothing about and who can hypnotize you and everyone within eyeball distance so fast your head doesn't have a chance to swim?

I didn't get much sleep the next couple of days.

Then a guard came along and said my lawyer was there to see me and I was to bring my personal gear, as I had been sprung. That made up my mind. Out was out and screw the rest of it.

Moukas was waiting for me, sweating and, to me, shimmering slightly. I was alarmed when I saw that his hair was black instead of the distinguished grey of his first visit, but either no one else noticed or they thought he had a quick dye job.

"Okay, how are we going to—"

He grabbed my arm and steered me to the door.

"Later, later. Not here."

We didn't say another word until we were safely in his car and driving down the road. Don't

ask me how a four foot tall hamster could drive a car. I don't know and I don't want to know.

"I've got us a room in the Holiday Inn at the interchange to the Interstate."

"Only one room?"

He gave me a disgusted look. "I don't have an unlimited expense account, you know, and it cost me a bundle to get you out of prison. At least you could show some gratitude by not griping about nits."

"Sorry."

"Anyhow, it's only to hole up in until we can figure out the details of the scam."

"Details! I don't even have a clue as to what the scam is yet."

"Not to worry. We'll think of something."

And we finally did. When we got to our room, we got comfortable. I took a long shower with plenty of soap and then put on a pair of loose slacks and a sport shirt. Moukas dropped his hypnoshield. It took me a little while to get used to talking to a large hamster dressed only in straps and pouches, but after a couple of stiff bourbons for me (Vorni don't drink) and a steak for me and a large salad for him, we started kicking ideas around. After a few half-baked ones that went nowhere, Moukas stared into space for a while with his eyes half closed. I thought he was starting to hibernate. Finally, he stirred

and muttered, "Platinum."

He looked at me and repeated, "Platinum. That's the only thing that will tempt him. More platinum."

"What's with you guys and platinum? I mean, I know it's valuable, but gold is almost as valuable and a lot easier to get hold of."

He looked at me scornfully.

"Do you think we use it for trinkets or hoard it like you Earthmen do? No, no, you don't understand. We need it as a catalyst. It is vital to us for all manner of organic processes; for producing synthetic foods, plastics, highly effective medicines. Without an ample supply the Vorni civilization would collapse. As such, it has a value manyfold its value here on Earth."

"But there must be hundreds of planets in the galaxy, some of them even uninhabited. How come Mikas is raiding Earth rather than mining one of those? Or is he just lazy and wants to have it laid out for him?"

Moukas grimaced. "Would that were true. Unfortunately, useable quantities of platinum are only found on high density planets such as Earth, and such high density planets are quite rare. Look at your own solar system. Of the nine planets, Earth is the only liveable one with appreciable quantities of minable metal. And out of the

rest of the galaxy that we can reach at present, the other suitable planets have been pretty well mined out. Vorn isn't the only platinum user, you know."

"I do now. So okay, let's hear your brilliant idea."

"Mikas is greedy. That haul he made when you were caught was good, but probably not enough to satisfy him. So what we have to do is bait him with the prospect of another haul of several million dollars' worth of platinum. Then when he tries to take it, we, or rather I, arrest him."

"Great idea! I'll run down to the corner store, give them my check for ten million dollars, and bring back a few hundred pounds."

"No need for sarcasm. We'll get the platinum the same way Mikas got the first lot."

A herd of butterflies flopped through my stomach.

"You mean steal it? You got to be kidding!"

"Borrow it. We will, of course, return it after we trap Mikas."

"If you think I'm going back into that federal vault, you're crazy."

"No, no, that was cleaned out. This time we'll go to one of the prime sources. Here, look at this."

He flipped open his briefcase and pulled out a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*. He leafed through it, then shoved a page

under my nose, pointing to a small article. I scanned it quickly. It was a report that the Russians were assembling a shipment of Lena River platinum somewhere in Central Siberia. They intended to sell it to help pay for their latest grain deal with the U. S.

I read the article through again, this time carefully. It didn't make me feel any better.

"You want to go to Siberia and heist a closely guarded shipment of platinum from the Russians?"

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Yeah, just cut our throats now and get it over with quickly and painlessly. Man, those KGB cats make our FBI look like a bunch of Boy Scouts."

"KGB? I've heard the term, but—"

"Russian secret police. Everyone has heard of them."

"They can't be so secret if everyone has heard of them. Tell me about them."

I told him what I knew, which wasn't much because I never really had an urge to become familiar with them.

"So, in other words, it would be these KGB's who would be responsible for the security of the platinum shipment?"

"Right."

"Humm—" He looked thoughtful. "Interesting. Look, you stay put until I get back."

And he just got up, became

a shimmery human, and walked out the door.

I stayed put mainly because I had nowhere to go. But I had a lot of time to think. In a few days, I had no fingernails left and the start of a king-sized ulcer.

When Moukas showed up again, he simply walked in the door and threw some documents on the table.

"I am now Colonel V. M. Vlastoff of the KGB and you are my aide, Major Dominoff."

I looked at the documents. They looked convincingly Russian to me, but for all I really knew they could have been season passes to Lenin's tomb.

"They are real all right. We have been assigned by KGB headquarters to guard the platinum shipment from Chita to Moscow."

"You're crazy! I don't know a damn thing about the Russians or their customs and I never got past 'nyet' in the language."

"It doesn't matter. The Russians will think you do."

He shimmered slightly and suddenly stood there in a neatly pressed KGB colonel's uniform. When he spoke, he sounded like the late Nikita Krushchev in one of his shoe-pounding moods. Then he switched back to his Vorner form.

"And it will be the same for you. Trust me."

I sighed.

I won't bore you with the details. In fact, I didn't really know the details. Moukas had outlined the routine for me, but when I started asking about the nitty-gritty, he said that if I were captured by the KGB, if I didn't know I couldn't tell them anything. I pointed out that this wouldn't keep them from trying, but that didn't seem to bother him. So I more or less tagged along and when, three days later, accompanied by a real KGB captain and chauffeured by a real Soviet Army sergeant, we drove through the snow-banked streets of Chita to the gates of the base where the platinum was stored, my ulcer was not much worse and I was still breathing, but with difficulty. We drove up to a squat, concrete building which looked as if it could take an atomic bomb without cracking the plaster. The real KGB colonel inside didn't seem too happy to see us, but after a frowning scrutiny of our papers, he swallowed his pride, shook our hands, and poured us a belt of vodka, which Moukas faked but I knocked back like mother's milk.

"If you will permit me, Colonel Vlastoff, I did not really expect you. Am I permitted to ask why Moscow sent you here to take over the shipment?"

"Of course, Colonel Yurgeev, of course."

Moukas dug into his briefcase and pulled out a thin envelope.

"I think this will explain most of it."

Colonel Yurgeev scanned the enclosed papers and slowly began to smile. I knew what the papers were. They gave the colonel and his family three weeks' delayed orders to Moscow via a Black Sea vacation resort. I sort of hoped the poor slob got to enjoy some of it before he had to explain what happened to the ten million dollars' worth of platinum we were going to borrow.

"But this is wonderful. Unexpected, but wonderful."

"Ah, but you see, colonel, Moscow has their eyes on you and appreciates the excellent work you have been doing here. Major Dominoff and I will undertake the dull job of accompanying the platinum to Moscow while you let the Crimean sunshine bake some of this Siberian cold out of your bones."

After that, Yurgeev was all smiles and buddy-buddy as he showed us around, explaining the arrangements he had made.

"I hope everything is satisfactory."

"Excellent, excellent. As I said before, Moscow has complete confidence in you."

The next morning, they loaded the platinum into an army truck and we all went down to the

railroad station where it was transferred to the special train that was supposed to take us to Moscow. This consisted of a diesel engine and tender and one armored car that was fitted out half for freight and half for passengers. There was a two-man train crew and four tough-looking Mongol guards. The guards carried AKM assault rifles with about a half ton of ammunition. The only two "officers" aboard were Moukas and myself.

We bid fond farewells to Colonel Yurgeev, who was preoccupied with thoughts of Crimean sunshine, and chugged out of the Chita yards at about 0900 with Moukas, myself, and two of the guards in the passenger section and the other two in with the platinum. The passenger section was fitted out lounge-style with comfortable seats and bunks. It was well stocked with the Russian version of fast foods and even an adequate stock of the ubiquitous vodka. The two guards, with the colonel's permission, had a bite to eat and then sacked out, the plan being that they would spell the guards in the freight section. The train crew would be changed at various stops along the way.

We rumbled through the desolate Siberian landscape for mile after mile, the only break being the occasional sight of a drab village huddled down in the

snow or a herd of reindeer or wolves in the distance.

After several hours of this, the boredom began to soothe my advanced case of jitters and I dozed off. I was jolted into apprehensive wakefulness by the feel of the train slowing down and finally coming to a stop. I looked at Moukas, and he seemed to be shimmering a little more than usual.

"Come on, this is where we do our bit."

I looked at the sleeping guards.

"Don't worry. Even if they were awake it wouldn't matter. They all think the train is still rolling along. But we have to hurry. We can't delay too long or we may be spotted by someone before I am aware of them and can control them."

We went into the freight section where the other two guards sat one on either side of the car gazing intently out the windows. They didn't know the trouble was right next to them. Moukas opened the outer door. We had stopped at the platform of what looked like a deserted station in the middle of a scrubby pine wood.

"An old logging station," Moukas explained. "Hasn't been used for years since all the first grade timber was cut. See that large shed down there? There is a hand truck next to it. Go get it."

By the time I got back with the hand truck, Moukas had pulled a steel plate over the narrow gap between the train and the platform.

"Come on, come on," he nattered. "Start unloading the platinum. I told you we have to hurry."

"Fine. And after we get it off the train what do we do with it? Backpack it to civilization?"

He grinned. "You'll see."

Somehow I didn't like the look of that grin, but I trundled the hand truck onto the train and over to where the platinum sat in the locked steel box on a skid. Suddenly I had a thought.

"Say, what if Colonel Yurgeev double-crossed us and this box is full of lead sinkers?"

"Nonsense. We both saw the platinum loaded into the box."

"But we didn't have our eyes on the box all the time. What if he had a buddy pull the old switcheroo. It would only be our word against his, even if we could stick around to argue."

Moukas snarled, "He wouldn't dare," but ended up with some doubt in his voice.

"We'd better check."

He stared at me for an instant. Then he went over and snatched a rifle from the hands of one of the guards, aimed it at the lock on the box, and let loose a blast. It sounded like the hammers of hell, but the guards did not even blink.

"Look."

I wrestled open the top and there they were, nice neat little platinum pigs all in a row. Suddenly I straightened up and looked towards the door.

"I thought I heard something out there. You've got the gun. Have a look. Your hotshot lock-busting may have attracted a wandering caribou."

Moukas went to the door and cautiously peered out.

"Nothing. Your weak Earthman nerves are showing. Come on, let's get started."

I maneuvered the hand truck under the skid. It groaned a bit under the weight, but picked it up. With Moukas dancing around giving useless advice, I wrestled the load out onto the platform. "Now what?"

"Wait a minute." He dashed over and slid the steel plate back into the car. Then he jumped back on the platform and closed the car door. He stood frowning for a few seconds and with a tired groan the train started rumbling down the siding and back onto the main line.

"There, they will never realize that the train stopped here. No one will know anything is wrong at least until it gets to the next stop to change crews."

"How long will that be?"

"About an hour. And then they will have to sort it out and backtrack."

"Meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, bring the platinum down here."

He ran ahead to the shed and threw the double doors open. I grunted after him with the hand truck. When I could see inside the shed, I stopped and my jaw bounced off the platform.

"Holy hell! A flying saucer!"

And it was. Not large, about fifteen feet in diameter. But a real live flying saucer, in baby blue.

"My personal ship. Compact, but capable of going almost anywhere in the galaxy."

He diddled with a belt buckle and a ramp opened out. We both grunted and shoved and got the hand truck on board. I started to look around, but Moukas stepped in front of me.

"Here, take this hand truck back to the platform. It takes up too much room in here."

I pushed the truck back to the platform. When I went back to the shed, Moukas was standing on the ramp of the saucer.

"Now we jump in your saucer and get the hell out of here. Right?"

There was that damn grin again.

"Wrong. I jump in the saucer. You don't."

I didn't need a diagram. The furry bastard was going to take off with the platinum and leave me stranded.

"Great. Now we have two

platinum thieving hamsters.”

“Wrong again. Only one. And I’m not a thieving hamster. I am Mikas Moukas, Great Procurer of Vorn, and I am appropriating both batches of platinum in the name of the Great Vornier of Vorn for the survival of our noble civilization.”

Just like a government official. When they grab something, they are appropriating it for a noble cause. But when I grab something, I’m stealing it for selfish gain.

I made one last try.

“At least you could take me and drop me off someplace.”

He appeared to consider this.

“I think not. The Russians are going to be looking all over the place for the platinum thief. It is better they have a well-known platinum thief to look for while I finish up some other slight business. After all, that is why I brought you into this in the first place.”

“You bastard. And you said you were going to help me.”

“I believe I have—How did you say it? Oh, yes—I believe I have pulled the other one.”

“You sneaky little rat!”

I started towards the ramp, mayhem in mind, but stopped abruptly when something that looked sickeningly like a gun

appeared in his hand.

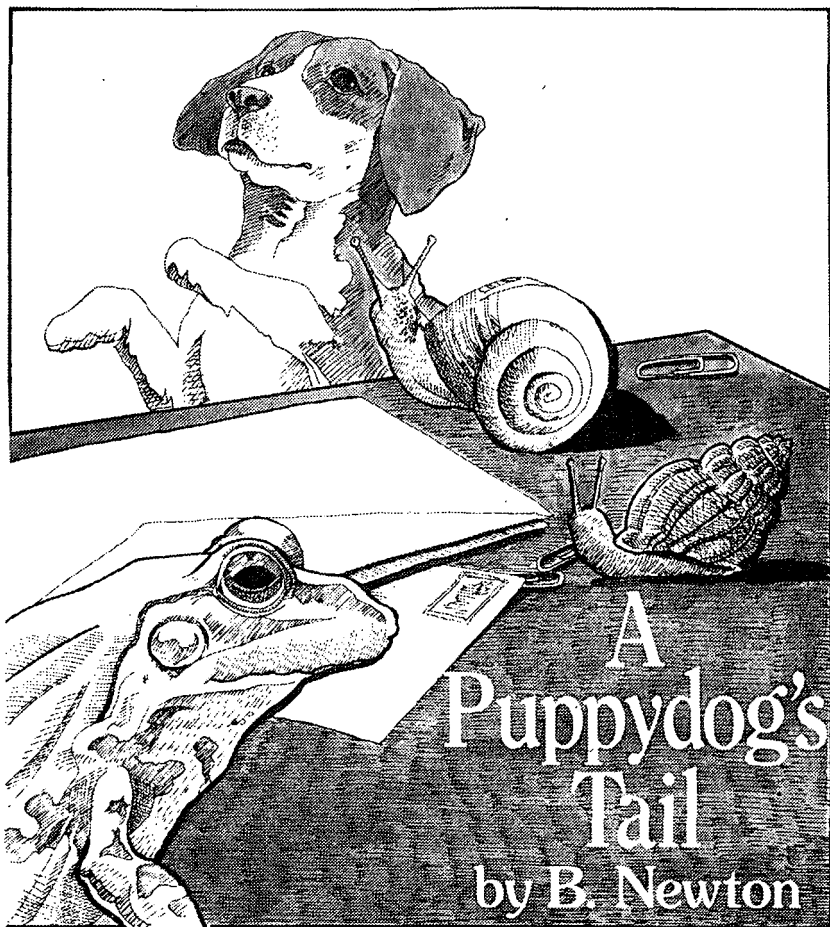
“I’d advise against it. This won’t kill you. We Vorni don’t believe in killing. But it would be very, very painful. Now, please return to the platform, as I am going to bring my ship out through this door.”

He started into the ship and then looked back.

“Oh, many thanks for your help. Have a nice day.”

I knew when I was licked. I stomped back to the platform. In a moment there was a high-pitched humming sound and the mini-saucer floated out of the shed. The humming went up to the dog-whistle range, the saucer rose through the pines and soon was a spot of nothing in the still, blue sky. All I could hear was the rustling of the pines and the agonized thumping of my heart.

So that was it. And here I am in the middle of Siberia, alone and like to freeze my butt off. Well, at least I’m not broke. That is, if I can peddle the two bars of platinum I held back on the little rat when we opened the box to “check it.” But I can’t head for Alaska. I’m sure the FBI is waiting for me there. And I can’t stay here. The place will soon be swarming with KGB. I wonder what’s doing in China.



I have found that being mute makes me one helluva bill collector; an unnerving one, which is the key. Because I don't argue because I can't, and how do you argue with someone who can't talk to you?

Take the morning of the day of the beagle and the brat . . .

Without a word I handed the clerk the overdue invoice. He glanced over it, then said he would have to get the manager;

if I would wait . . . I just nodded. Not a word—that's the secret: Nod, not a word, and unnerve them.

After he left through a door marked PRIVATE behind the counter, I walked around. The pet shop was small and smelly. Along the front wall puppies yelped and yapped; in the rear two birds squawked in short, staccato bursts; it was dark and shadowed and cool; there was the hum of the aquarium filters and the scurrying of animals in newspaper-floored cages. And there was the smell: muted and mixed, but marked and untraceable as incense.

I spent several futile minutes trying to locate the three chameleons an index card taped to one of the aquariums claimed were in there somewhere, before giving up and heading up front to the puppies, which were not hard to find at all.

I stuck four fingers between the bars of the cage with beagle puppies and watched all six of them scratch and scamper over one another to get to the front to lick and nip and teethe my fingers.

One, larger than the rest, climbed over four of the others and didn't lick, nip, or teethe: he bit, and hard, and drew blood, then refused to let go. He was a vicious, mean little sucker, stubborn as a pit bull, with

teeth as sharp and cutting as my wit—ha, ha. I tell you it hurt like *hell*. My eyes watered even.

I had a helluva time getting my poor finger back. When I finally succeeded in saving it from the savage carnivore, I stuck my finger in my mouth to suck on it and stop the bleeding and ease the throbbing; it was terrible. Glaring at the dog, I would have liked to call him a few choice names, but I couldn't so I had to settle for the glare, and it wasn't nearly as satisfying.

The possessed cur yelped piercingly, clawing through the bars for me, saliva dripping out of the sides of its mouth—it had tasted blood and was out of control.

Cujo, I thought. The dog was rabid; I stepped back.

After a short time he sat back on his haunches and looked at me in the same way I was looking at him. He whined.

Cunning, I thought. Trying to play the innocent, sweet, children-loving puppy. Well, no go. I took my finger from my mouth and waved it at him to remind him I had physical evidence of his ferocity.

His eyes became soft and lonely as a puppy's will. His five friends frolicked about him, but he didn't join them—he was giving me his baleful gaze.

You don't need a dog, Al, I thought. Murray will kill you.

I stuck my finger back in my mouth and hurried to the counter to wait for the manager. He entered a moment later.

"Can I help you?" he said.

Taking finger from mouth, I pointed to the invoice he held.

"Yes, well, I'm afraid I can't take care of this today, you see. Today is a bad time." He was a small, older man with no hair at all. He wore glasses with large circular frames. He had thin lips.

I didn't say anything.

He blinked at me. "Business hasn't been very good lately," he said. His clerk stood nervously beside him, playing with the lobe of his ear.

I still said nothing.

"What about next week sometime? I might be able to handle this then. Does that sound all right?"

I shook my head.

"Well," he said, trying a short laugh, "you can't squeeze blood out of a turnip, you know."

I gave him the smile I've been working on, the one that says I can squeeze blood out of anything.

"I could write you a check," he said. He reached beneath the counter and brought out the black business checkbook.

But he had written checks for

this before, the report had read. I shook my head.

"Well, if you won't take a check, then how am I supposed to pay you?" he asked, his voice rising. "What do you want me to do?"

I pointed again at the invoice.

"Yes, yes, I know that," he said, waving it and throwing it on the counter. "But how? How, is what I want to know."

That wasn't my problem. I shrugged.

"Dammit, say something," he almost screamed.

I shrugged again.

"Fine," he said, flushing deeper. "Just fine. If you won't talk, I will. I *can't* pay this now. I just don't have it. That's all there is to it. I'm sorry. I'll take care of it when I can." He turned back into his office.

The clerk and I stood there, the invoice I had come to collect on the counter between us. I smiled and shrugged. He grinned weakly himself.

Ten minutes later when I was still standing there, the clerk left for the back room again. I heard hard, rapid whispering and the slamming of something and a harsh, "*He won't go away.*"

Then: "What if I pay some of it now and take care of the rest later?" asked the small, bald man, coming out of the door, the clerk scuttling close behind him.

I frowned, but nodded.

"Walter," said the manager, "see what we can afford out of the till."

I feel it is always better to collect something than nothing and come back in a week or so for the balance, so I took his payment and walked out to Maggie, my green '68 Ford. It was late morning and the warming air made me feel good, fresh or something. I made some notes for the file, and then, and I still don't really know why, because my finger still hurt, I went back into the shop and bought the damn beagle that bit me.

The clerk was speechless this time.

He rode quietly in the passenger seat in the sturdy traveling box the much-surprised shop clerk had provided. I think the dog knew that he was not long for the confined world and was quite willing to serve his final minutes in prideful, dignified silence.

I decided to name him Dun, and then gave thought to my strategy in handling Murray's certain arguments.

"Dun?" said Murray. "Dun? What kind of name is Dun?"

Murray's my younger brother, and as younger brothers go, he's pretty bad. He's also my

partner in AAAM Investigations, and as partners go, he's the worst: but it works, I will say that; it works because he's the paper pusher and I'm the people pusher and together we do all right in getting what we want. So I keep him around—thorn in my shoe though he may be.

I explained to him my reasoning and ingenuity behind the naming of the dog. A dun was what I went to the pet shop to collect, it was what brought us together, it would shape our relationship into one of mutual indebtedness—

He was shaking his head and tsking. This is what Murray does with all my ideas—ah, untrue. Sometimes he rolls his eyes. "Sometimes, Al," he said, looking at me and the squirming, nipping pup in my arms, "you are too, too impulsive. What in God's name are you going to do with a dog?"

I shrugged.

He smiled a gentle smile of pity and shook his head. "Sometimes, Al," he said, "sometimes I just don't know about you.

"Anyway," he stood, "enough of that. Right now we have an appointment with a client. A poor lady who's confined to a wheelchair and can't get out of the house. Called while you were out buying that... well, she asked if we could stop by.

I told her it'd be our pleasure. She sounded sweet."

Sweet or not, I didn't particularly care: he'd ticked me off with his smile and "you silly boy" manner, and my zippadee-dooda mood was shot to hell. He's good at that, Murray is.

Dun again rode quietly in his traveling box, and I was glad that he was not setting about making a bad impression on Murray—my brother is not as understanding as I. I was glad too that it was not a long drive. I don't recall a word Murray muttered, but I'm sure it was nothing worth hearing in the first place.

Kelley Wagner lived in a small brick house at the end of Kansas Street on three or four acres; high square shrubs stretched along its sides, a thick-trunked maple bent over the roof, shading her home. A blue Ford Escort sat in the driveway; there was a weathered backboard with a rusted, drooping basketball rim above the garage. In the street along the curb was parked a puke green pickup; its peeling yellow bumper sticker almost made me smile: THE RIGHT TO ARM BEARS.

Cute, I thought, and pulled into the drive behind the Ford.

"Smile, Al," said Murray.

I gave him the same smile I gave the pet shop owner. He frowned. We walked up the plank ramp to the door, and I let him do the honors of ringing the bell.

Kelley Wagner wheeled away from answering the door and invited us in. She was young: Murray's age. She had lovely brown-blonde hair pulled back into a looped ponytail and her face was round and—dammit—sweet. Her voice was quiet, shy, trembling. She seated us in the living room and asked if we would care for anything to drink. We both declined.

The room was neat. Shelves were along the walls, placed with batches of books and porcelain figurines. There was a clock high on a top shelf; its gold pendulum rocked and ticked. Centered atop the glass coffee table in front of us was a closed photo album, and that was all. It seemed an orderly home.

"I want to thank you," she smiled a little, "for making a house call," she said. "I understand it probably isn't your normal way of doing business."

Murray said ours wasn't a normal kind of business anyway so it was really no problem at all and—even though he didn't ask my opinion on the matter—said it was our pleasure.

"Well," Kelley Wagner said, "I do appreciate it. I didn't honestly know what else to do, and there was no way of my getting out of the house, so—" she turned her hands in her lap; a sad helpless gesture, I thought, and she had me.

"As I said," said Murray, "it's no problem. No problem at all. And I mean it. Now—on the phone you mentioned your boy has run away..." He had a notepad and pencil out.

"Yes. This is the second time, too." Kelley Wagner said she knew her seven-year-old had run off to his father's; it was where he had gone the first time, it was where he had probably gone now.

"Have you contacted the police?"

"I haven't, no." She kneaded her hands. "For the main reason that I don't want to scare him or cause him to believe I'm forcing him to stay here in this house with his crippled mother. I don't want that. I just need someone to bring him home. Quietly."

Murray asked how long she and her husband Joshua Wagner had been divorced.

"Three years this September," she answered.

"Do you have custody of Matthew, Ms. Wagner?" asked Murray—he's a sly one, that Murray, I will say that.

But she did. She spread the court papers out on the coffee table and both Murray and I looked them over carefully. I had no idea what I was looking for, but Murray, my brother the lawyer, knew, and when he was satisfied, I was satisfied.

He gathered the papers into a neat pile and laid them atop the photo album. "All right, Ms. Wagner," he said, "we'll bring Matthew home. But there are a few details we need to discuss."

I became like a used guest on the *Tonight Show*, sitting and silent, maybe forgotten, forgotten as many other dumb things.

It was early afternoon. Murray promised to return Kelley Wagner's son to her by five.

On the drive back to the office I let Dun climb and scramble and drool all over Maggie. He liked sitting on my lap between my arms, gnawing on my stubbly chin while I steered. It tickled and was wet and several times we almost veered into the ditch, Murray hollering for me to keep my eyes on the road, but I only tilted my head away and laughed. When he wasn't hollering, Murray sighed a lot, and whenever Dun tried to climb or chew on him, he scolded, "No. Down. Bad dog. Bad dog. Down," and shoved poor Dun away.

At the office, Murray replayed the answering machine, and I flipped through the mail. I told him there was nothing important and tossed the small bundle on his desk. He double-checked it while I fed and watered the pup, and then informed me there wasn't anything important in the afternoon's mail.

I asked if he was sure.

Joshua Wagner's address was far towards the northern outskirts of Ann Arbor, along Zeeb Road, a straight gravel strip through growing green cornfields and canyon-deep rock quarries. It was a clear warm day, and the wind whipping in my window helped cleanse me of aggravation. It was nice, except that Murray rode beside me and wouldn't shut up. He was upset by the new tax law and the surge in terrorism and the gay movement and his mechanic's sloppy job on his car, and he spent quite some time detailing the sad auto's ailments. I grunted and nodded and didn't mind much at all: I couldn't hear him with the wind in my ears.

Dun napped on the back seat.

Joshua Wagner met us out on his large, swooping, circular drive. He stood on the porch wearing jeans and a T-shirt,

carried a cup in his hand, his hair ruffled, his eyes puffy and red. If it was coffee in the cup, Murray wasn't the pest I thought he was. And Murray *is* a pest.

"Yeah?" Josh Wagner said. "Whaddaya want?"

"Mr. Wagner?" said Murray.

"That's right."

"We're private detectives." Murray showed Wagner his I.D. and license. "We were hired by your ex-wife to find your son Matthew. She thought we might find him here."

"Find him? Is that what she said? *Find* him?" He laughed. "That's a good one. Did she say I kidnapped him or something?"

"No," said Murray. "She's afraid he may have run away to here. Like before."

"Before? Look, I don't know what kind of line she's feeding you, but it's a helluva one. The kid would no more run away to here than he would run to hell. Believe me." He gulped from his mug. "But I'm a little tired of it. This is the second time I've come home and found him waiting on my porch like a goddamn puppy or something. The courts dumped him on her—the only break they gave me. He's her responsibility. Let her do her duty.

"I'm a writer, okay? I don't have time for him; he gets in

the way and makes noise; he bugs me. So next time she whips in here and kicks him out in the drive, *I'm* hiring some rent-a-cops to take him *back*. Got it?

"He's out back somewhere."

He tossed the contents of his cup into the bushes in front of the porch and turned inside. "Oh, and thanks," he called over his shoulder as the screen door slammed.

"Goodness," said Murray.

Bastard, I thought.

Things troubled me as I followed Murray around the brick ranchhouse to the acres of back yard.

Like, why had Josh Wagner said that Kelley had dropped Matthew off when she had hired us to bring him home? And why would he lie? Why would she...? Maybe no one was lying, and I just didn't understand squat. I have learned that there is much I don't understand. I signed this to Murray as we scanned the back yard for Matthew and he said: "Don't worry, I do."

And so of course I started worrying.

The yard sloped steeply down and at its base we could see a thin creek and trees beside its edge, some willows and other narrow, drooping saplings; tall brown-crowned pussy willows and cattails grew in its muddy

banks, and it curved and trickled away into the woods of the remaining land between Wagner's house and his neighbor's.

Matthew was down along this creek. Murray—the legal-eagle eye of the two of us—pointed to him standing on the bank, winding up like a Little Leaguer, and throwing things at one of the trees. We walked down beside him.

"Matthew," said Murray, "I'm—"

It was then we saw what the thin, sandy-haired seven-year-old was hitting with smooth and creek-whipped stones; I was sickened. Rushing by Murray and the young boy, I took my jackknife from my pocket, and, sliding and slipping into the creek along the mudbank, I hurried to the near willow.

It took me too long to cut down the bloodied frog Matthew had hung from a low branch with string tied to only one of its legs. The other leg flipped madly, wildly; the yellow sac of skin under its jaw pulsed.

I placed the stoned and dying frog into the water and watched it try to swim away. I lost it when it dived deep, just one leg kicking, and into some cattails. I'm sure that it did not swim far and that it did not live long.

Murray was horrified. Matthew shrugged and said he

needed a target to practice his pitching. I told Murray I was ready to go.

"Doesn't he talk?" Matthew asked.

"No," said Murray. He stared at the boy. "Matthew," he said, "how could you . . . ? That's . . . don't you—"

I slapped Murray's shoulder, told him I was ready to go.

"Yes. I think I am, too," he said.

"Why can't he talk," said Matthew. "Huh? Why?"

Murray turned to the boy. "We're here to take you back to your mother. She's worried about you."

"Does that mean she's not going to Greece?"

We started back up the hill; I walked a ways ahead.

"I guess," said Murray. "She didn't mention anything about Greece to us. Did she, Al?"

I pretended not to hear. Then I picked up my pace and soon I really couldn't have heard them if I tried. And I didn't try.

Up at the house, Murray asked Matthew if he wanted to go in to tell his father he was leaving and goodbye.

"That's okay," said Matthew. He had seen Dun—who was yelping and pawing wildly at the driver's window—and he ran across the gravel to Maggie

and opened the car's door.

Murray said he would tell the boy's father that we were leaving and went up the weathered steps of the porch; I walked out to Maggie.

Matthew was in her back seat wrestling with Dun. But there was no laughter from the boy and no smile; he played grimly, with a slight frown as if it were no fun at all, a chore, or the only thing to do on a grey rainy day.

I got in behind the wheel, but left the door open and my leg stretching out. I thought about some things that weren't settling well: the Ford Escort, Greece, running away or dumping off—how a boy could be so cruel while still so young.

Dun let out a sharp, pained yelp. I spun around. Matthew was tugging Dun up from the floor, a tight grip on the puppy's short tail. "Come on, get up here," Matthew was saying, his teeth clenched, eyes squinted. Dun yelped again and squirmed and twisted his head back, trying to nip the boy's fingers.

I lunged my arm into the back seat and scooped Dun up and away. I cradled him in my lap.

"He wouldn't stay in my lap," said Matthew. He leaned over the seat. "Can I have him back? I won't hurt him again—I promise. Please. Can I? Huh?"

I gave no sign I had heard him. I reached for the traveling box and set it on the seat beside me and placed Dun inside with the lid open, my hand across the top to keep him inside and safe.

"Can I have him back? Put the box back here. I won't let him out. Hey. Hey." He tugged on my shirt. "Put the box back here, okay? Huh? Hey." He stuck his hand over the seat and tried to turn my face towards him with his hand on my chin. I kept my eyes on the front door, looking for Murray. "Hey. *Listen.* There's room for the box back here. Okay? Put the box back here."

When Murray finally came down across the drive and got in beside me, I told him another minute and the kid would have been dead.

"Another minute," said Murray, "and so would've his father."

My brother dealt with the brat the rest of the ride. He had to keep telling him that "No, you can't have Dun, Dun belongs to Al. Besides, your mother wouldn't want you to have a puppy."

Matthew whined his mother never let him have *any* pets. But if he could have "Doone" then he could keep him in his box during the day and let him out to play during the nights his mother was away.

But Murray was patiently

adamant in his refusal, he's pretty good with kids, and I drove, one hand on the wheel, one hand scratching Dun's nape. It wasn't as pleasant a drive going back.

Kelley Wagner did not answer the door. It was a tall, clean-shaven man with thin brown hair and round glasses. He rested his hands in his pockets, looked like a librarian. "Matthew," he said, "your mother's waiting for you upstairs."

"What are you doing here, Wayne?" asked the boy.

"You never mind that. Your mother wants you upstairs, so you better get along and let me take care of these gentlemen."

Matthew shrugged, then ran past the man and the stairs and into the kitchen. "Hey, where're you going?"

"Get something," the boy called.

"But your mother—" A door slammed.

"Damn." The man turned to us. "He's hard to control sometimes."

No kidding.

"I hope you didn't have any trouble bringing him back," the man finished.

Murray chuckled. "Boys are supposed to be trouble," he said. "With a capital T, even."

They laughed, and the li-

brarian held out his hand. "Wayne Cousins. I'm a friend of Kelley's." He explained that Kelley was sorry she couldn't thank us herself, but she thought it better for the boy if he didn't actually witness his mother "conniving" with his kidnappers, so to speak. Wayne said she hoped we would understand. He thanked us for doing such a fine, quick job and opened the door. Why did I feel as if we were being herded out fast? I didn't know, but I did.

Murray said, "Of course." He shook Wayne's hand. "Please tell Ms. Wagner for us that it was our pleasure getting her son back, and we hope that everything works out for the best."

Even when I could talk, I couldn't say things as nicely as Murray. He's so good at it. A long time past he used to write poetry—that is, before he became a lawyer and put away childish things and burned his words.

I shook Wayne's hand and nodded and we left. That should have been it. We were done and we were clean, but things were soon to get dirty.

On the way back, Murray was talking and I was trying to remember one of his poems that began: "My friend and me, close as could be . . ." but it would not come to me even though I

squeezed my eyes and tried to read his teenaged scrawl in my mind.

It was ten minutes before Murray asked, "Hey, where's the dog?"

I looked. Dun was not in his box; he wasn't in the car at all. I pounded the brakes and whirled Maggie around, tires screaming, spitting gravel.

Goddamn brat, I thought.

"Matthew," said Murray.

I was going to kill him. I was going to kill the little demon, the rotten brat. I know boys will be boys, but dammit, this one should have been tarred and feathered, at least strung up by his toenails, or . . . There was no excuse for it. No good goddamn excuse . . . and if he had hurt my dog . . . pity him.

"Now, Al," Murray said, "remember. He's just a boy."

But it did no good trying to calm me. When I slammed over the curb and down into Kelley Wagner's drive, crammed Maggie into park, and banged open her door, I was still fit to kill.

I pounded the knocker. I pounded harder. When it wasn't answered immediately, I started kicking the base of the door a couple of times. Murray grabbed my elbow then, attempting to quiet me. "Al," he said. He tried to pull me off the porch, but I

wasn't going. I yanked my elbow away and went back to the door. "Come on, Al, calm down," said Murray. He took my arm and I threw his hand off again. He nudged me to the side so he could knock politely, but I nudged back. Then he pushed. And I shoved. Soon I was wrestling him—and still getting sound swipes with a fist or foot on Kelley Wagner's door.

"Al, quit it," grunted Murray.

We stumbled. A terra cotta pot was knocked out onto the drive, shattering. Murray grappled me into the flower bed and we trampled a dozen marigolds into the dirt. I kicked him in the knee. "Dammit," he said, wincing. "That . . . wasn't . . . nice," he said between grunts and oofs. He almost got a good wrap around my throat from behind, but I spun and ducked my shoulder into his gut, ramming him backwards and into the hedge. He ripped his jacket; a sharp branch scraped my cheek. The hedge had crashed in around us. We were breathing heavily and couldn't get to our feet.

No one had come to the door. There was just a silence throughout the entire neighborhood, it seemed. I felt a little silly.

"Get me out of here, you jerk," said Murray. I scooted

out and off him, then gave him a hand, pulling him from inside the bush. He straightened his glasses. And after examining the rip in his coatsleeve, gave it a disgusted flip. He snorted. "Wonderful. Thank you very much. Appreciate it. Torn suits are in style now. Thanks."

I showed him the cut on my cheek and thanked him for that.

"Your own fault. Now go see if that door's open. Something seems funny. And please do it quietly, okay? You're not a little boy any more, for chrissakes."

Neither are you, I told him. See, I can be cutting, too.

The front door was locked, but we went around to the back and found that one open. We knocked again before going in.

Quiet houses excite me. I can feel the quiet hiding something, a secret, a mystery, sleeping thoughts and plans—something. My pulse always quickens.

"Ms. Wagner?" called Murray. "Ms. Wagner. Matthew? Wayne—anybody here?" There was no answer. I could hear the air conditioning humming and whirring and the refrigerator click on and a drip from the kitchen faucet. I could smell the emptiness, the desertion.

I signed I would check upstairs, and Murray nodded. He pointed down the hall off the

living room: he would go that way. I felt like a thief and loved it.

There was no one on the second level. I peered into all the bedrooms and wondered where everyone could have gone so quickly. Where were they? What had happened?

I heard Murray call: "Al! Oh God, Al."

I rushed down the stairs and found Murray in a doorway in the hall. I went towards him; he turned to me, his face grey and his lips pale, and pointed into the room.

I'd never seen the woman before. She lay folded in the tub of the downstairs bathroom, her neck at a right angle, a line of blood from the corner of her mouth to the tip of her chin. Her black hair was long and wet, tangled, knotted; one eyelid remained half open, the eye staring at the tile.

I took Murray's elbow and led him from the doorway.

After a bit, Murray phoned the police and I sat on the couch in the living room. I opened the photo album on the coffee table and flipped through it, my mind kind of numb and bewildered. There was a picture of Matthew as a baby, looking as round and pudgy and deviously innocent as all babies and most

puppies; Matthew and some friends at a birthday party, all wearing hats and looking ready to cry; Josh Wagner was there holding high in one hand a long fish, in his other hand the pole, and he was squinting into the sun and smiling; there were a couple of photographs of people I didn't recognize, which isn't surprising considering this wasn't my family album, and there were pictures of parties and picnics and a picture of the woman in the tub and there was—I flipped back the page and looked closer at the picture of the woman standing in front of some great monument, her hand shading her eyes. It was her, all right, it was the dead woman in the tub. As I was peeling back the plastic dust cover to get a look at the back of the picture, I noticed another, up in the corner and a little dark. It was another of the woman; this time she had her arm around the waist of a guy with a thick beard and mustache and sunglasses, and they were both smiling. But what really caught my eye was the ugly green pickup they were standing in front of and the yellow bumper sticker I could make out. I removed this picture instead of the other and read its back: "Wayne and Kelley '84." I looked again at the photo. I puzzled a little. If I erased the

mustache and beard and added round, clear glasses—damn! I had a librarian. This guy in the picture was Wayne Cousins. And the woman had to be Kelley Wagner.

But then I thought, if this woman in the bathtub is Kelley Wagner, who is the woman in the wheelchair? Who hired you? Why would Cousins say she was Kelley Wagner . . . ?

I shook my head to clear it a little and took the picture into the kitchen and to Murray. I handed it to him without a sign. He studied it, his brow crinkling, his lips puckering. He looked up at me and said, "What the hell is going on here?"

I told him, you got me.

"Wait a minute," he said. "If this is Kelley Wagner, then that woman who hired us used us to *kidnap* Matthew."

That was how it looked all right. Shows you just how trusting and stupid a sweet face can make you.

"Al," Murray said, "Al, we've got to get that kid back." He closed his eyes to calm himself. "All right. Fine." He took a breath. "We can be relatively confident that Wayne Cousins is involved with all of this to some extent."

Unless he's dumber than we are, probably to a lot of extent, I signed.

"Yes, probably. We can also

be quite sure that they're not going to be hanging around long; they'll want to get out of the state, the country even, I imagine, as quickly as possible, so we haven't much time. What we have to ask ourselves is where they would have taken him. That's what we need to know first."

People are stupid, more often than not they don't think—look at Murray and me, case in point—so I reached for the phonebook and found *Cousins*, W. I tapped his address with my finger, and Murray said, "A guess as good as any, I guess."

I thought it a guess a little better than "any," but what the hell, I didn't argue.

Murray becomes uncomfortable—no, let's say distraught—when I drive. Going out to Cousins' place was no joyride for him. When he wasn't holding his breath or demanding I slow down or telling me to watch this, then that, curve, he tried to figure it all out. I'm sure he found it unbelievably difficult to concentrate, but he made the effort, and I admire him for that.

"The two of them must have been planning this—watch that truck—for some good time," he said. "With the boy's mother in Greece, thinking he was with

his father, and his father believing we'd returned him to his mother, Wayne Cousins and this woman could have been long—whoa! Take it easy, will you?—could have been long gone to wherever for who knows how long before somebody thought something was funny and called the police. Of course, God only—

"Al! Slow *down*, for chris-sakes. What are you trying to do, kill us both?"

I don't even honor such dumb questions with a response. I told him I thought Wayne must have been married to Kelley Wagner at some point.

He told me to keep my hands on the wheel, reaching for it to swing us back into our lane; he doesn't believe I can drive beautifully with just my knees.

"Yes, I agree," he said of my idea. "That's why Matthew was surprised when he answered the door. But somewhere," he tapped his pursed lips in thought, "somewhere," he said, "something went wrong. Kelley Wagner returned home for some reason. They panicked, knowing she'd be irate when we showed up later with her son, so they killed her. Hmmpf. She was dead and in the tub while we stood on her porch chatting with Cousins, just chatting away with her probable killer. Oh, Al, I'm such a fool sometimes."

That invited, it begged, for a

response, and oh so tempting it was too, but I let it slide by, thinking it wasn't the time and that, yes, I had been a fool, too—not as often as Murray, of course, but, well, we had *both* been duped but good, and I'm not one to pick on a lesser man's mental shortcomings, regardless of how short they may be.

Instead, I told him we were pretty lucky the kid snatched Dun or we'd have never known how stupid we had been.

He gave me an odd look and said, "Yes, I suppose in a weird way, that's true."

Dusk was coming—the whole world going grey fast. The sky was still clear and open, though darkening, and the air was growing a nip.

Wayne Cousins' place was an old brick farmhouse, its porch roof sagging, the third step up missing. Out in back in the weeds on the side of the old barn were two rusting cars and a tractor with no seat. The pickup with its bumper sticker was in the drive. There were several square weathered buildings around and a chicken coop down a small hill a ways.

Our car doors slammed loudly in the twilight: but for the insects' droning there was little other noise. We walked up the porch steps—neatly avoiding

the missing third—and Murray knocked . . . and knocked again.

Wayne Cousins was a long time in answering, but finally, on Murray's fifth rap, he appeared, his shadow filling the entryway as the door swung in. "Yes?" he said. "Oh, hi. What're you doing here?"

"We're here to speak with you, Mr. Cousins," said Murray. "There are some questions we'd like to ask."

"Yeah? Oh. Well, come in." He stepped back, letting us into the tiled foyer where once the farmer and his kids might have removed their boots or stomped mud off their shoes.

"What kind of questions?" he asked as he walked down a short hall into the living room.

"I'm sure you're way ahead of us, Mr. Cousins," said Murray.

"No, really, I've no idea." He waved a hand. "Have a —"

"Mr. Hubbs." The woman's voice came from behind us; we turned. She had parked her wheelchair in the archway to the foyer, and she was frowning a little. She also had a gun and was holding it awfully steady, too steady for my taste. "I'm sorry about this," she said. "It wasn't supposed to work out this way—not this way at all. This sounds silly, but would you please put your hands up?"

Murray and I moved our

hands out from our sides—it didn't sound silly at all, it wouldn't have if she'd asked me to drop my pants. Guns pointed at me somehow help me to see things differently, I guess.

"Wayne, see if they have any guns."

"Lynn-Marie—"

"Please just do it, Wayne," she said.

Cousins did, and he took my shoulder-holstered .38. Murray of course wasn't carrying, but the whole time he was trying to convince Lynn-Marie to put the revolver down and give it up: "We found Kelley," he said calmly, always calmly, unless, of course, I'm driving. "We've called the police, and they'll be here shortly, rest assured. There is no use in striving to carry out this doomed plot of yours. Even if you get away from here, if you get out of the state, you're not going to have the enormous head start you were counting on, now are you? Of course not. The police will be right behind you. You won't have a chance of escaping."

"I think he's right, Lynn-Marie," said Wayne.

"Of course I am. Now listen—" Murray stepped towards her.

She raised the gun. "No. Get back. We don't have time to listen, that's all you've convinced me of." She spoke to Wayne, "Do you think we could lock

them in the cellar somehow?"

"Somehow, sure. But I really don't think we—"

"Wayne," said Lynn-Marie, her voice strained, tight, near cracking, "we can't let Matthew down now. We've got to do this. For him, remember?"

Wayne moved from where he stood behind us, crossing the room, and looked out a window. "If they've found Kelley's body, then we've had it. He's right about that, Lynn-Marie. And I'm wondering if running off with Matthew won't just damage him more than he already has been."

She cried out, "More than what his parents have done to him simply by not wanting him? More than that? At least this way he'll know someone cares for him and loves him and *wants* him. You don't know what it's like to grow up unloved and unwanted—it's not a bowl of cherries, I'll tell you that, and I won't let it happen to Matthew. This is his last chance. I'm not going to throw it away. He means more to me than that, and he needs someone right now. He needs us, Wayne, can't you see that?"

"But what can we do?" He said this softly, still looking out the window. "If they've found Kelley's body . . .

"Wait." He turned, his eyes wide and anxious, his hands

trembling. "Wait. I've got an idea. The police will only know about Kelley's death, right? I mean, they don't know anything about our taking Matthew?"

"I don't see how they could," said Murray. We shared a glance. He was wondering if I could get to the gun; I was wondering if I dared.

"Well, that's good. That's it. That's what we'll do. Lynn-Marie, look, this is what we've got to do. Listen to me." He was walking towards her, his arm outstretched. "The police don't know that you've done anything. If I tell them about Kelley, just that she walked in on us and flew into a rage and I knocked her down defending myself, then they'll have nothing to do with you, they won't have any reason to do anything."

"But . . . but what about you?" Lynn-Marie asked. "What—"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Really. I'm not a murderer and they'll see that, so it'll be okay. The important thing is that you'll be able to return to the house and I'm sure no one will see any reason not to leave Matthew with you and then I'm *really* sure that his father won't give you any fight for custody. Don't you see? This is exactly what we wanted. Even if I have to serve a couple of years, it'll

be worth it, believe me.”

“But why can’t we—”

“No, Lynn-Marie, this is the only way. It’s either this or we give up right now, right here. There’s no way we’re going to get everything we wanted; we messed up, and now we’ve got to pay for it, that’s all there is to it. Now. Tell me what you want.”

She looked at him for a second or two, and I almost moved on her, but then she had decided and nodded. “All right,” she said, “if that’s what we have to do. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” said Wayne. “It will be all right.”

Murray lowered his hands a bit and stepped forward. “Excuse me,” he said, smiling a bit sarcastically, “but I think you’ve forgotten my brother and me. The ones you have the gun on?”

“No,” said Wayne. He took the gun gently from Lynn-Marie’s hand. “How could we forget you?”

Oh swell, I thought. I saw the two of us dead in the cellar. But then not really; he wouldn’t kill us: bodies are complications, as they would have learned through their experience with Kelley Wagner’s corpse ruining everything they had planned.

I was right, of course. And when Wayne said they needed our help, I almost thanked God, but then didn’t. Why? I thought.

Wayne was calm as he talked; Murray was calm as he listened; I was not calm, but it is easy to appear calm if you cannot speak to express your panic and can only stand there looking calm.

“I’ll start at the beginning,” he said. He was going to tell us as clearly as he could what had happened, how everything got swept away like a little old lady in a panicked crowd.

About four years ago, he told us, still holding the gun, Murray and I still standing, Wayne had married Kelley Wagner. It turned out not to be the smartest of moves. Then when Lynn-Marie had her accident, she went to stay with her sister, and Wayne fell in love with her.

“She was so sweet,” Wayne said, looking at her, smiling gently. She looked into her lap. I resisted an urge to look at Murray. The lady draws a gun, and everyone’s calling her sweet; it was kinda weird.

Anyway, continued Wayne, that was the cause for the divorce.

Kelley couldn’t handle the thought that he loved her sister more than he loved her—which apparently wasn’t very hard to do at all. Wayne moved out here, to his grandparents’ old farm. He continued seeing Lynn-Marie whenever Kelley was away, and he would hear how

Kelley treated Matthew and how much it bothered Lynn-Marie and how much she wanted to do something about it, take him away somewhere or something.

"When Kelley announced she was going to Greece for a month or so, Lynn-Marie thought now was the time."

"I had planned it all out months before," she put in. "I would lie awake at night and just think and think, plotting it all out. If you had seen the way she treated the child, you would understand my desperation; it was simply unbearable."

"So Lynn-Marie pretty much had everything set up; all I had to do was run with it. It was a good solid plan, and if it had worked we would have been long gone before anyone noticed anything. I don't think they would ever have found us."

Murray agreed that that was probably true. Especially if the parents had thought good-ridance.

"Yes," said Wayne. "And they probably would have. They were that way, the both of them." He passed a hand over his face. "And now the only part I regret, deeply, deeply regret. Killing Kelley. I didn't mean to, I really didn't. But when she returned from the airport—for what reason God only knows—and she

found me there with her sister, she went crazy. It happened just like I'm going to tell the police; Kelley attacked, literally *attacked* Lynn-Marie. She was clawing and hitting her, calling her all sorts of foul names, accusing her of stealing me, that sort of thing. It was horrible. And all I did, I swear, all I did was take her by the shoulder and pull her off Lynn-Marie and shove her away. That's *all* I did. But . . . she fell and hit her head and . . . she died . . . she just died.

"And so then we just freaked out and our only thought was getting the hell out of there. I've never had to do anything more difficult than pretend everything was okay and cool when you two dropped Matthew off. It was terrible. This whole ordeal's been terrible."

He walked back around behind Lynn-Marie. He put a hand on her shoulder, she pressed her cheek to it. "Now," he said. "You know what happened; you know why we did what we did—for Matthew, to give him a chance at a true childhood. And you know what we want to do with the police." He took a breath. "And you know that we need your help."

"Do you know what you're asking us to do?" said Murray.

"Yes," said Wayne. "We just want you to think of the boy."

"Please," said Lynn-Marie. "Please. With the family life Matthew's had, is it any wonder he is the way he is? Is it any wonder at all?"

I'm sure I didn't know, and sure I'm still not sure now.

"He just needs a chance, that's all," she said.

A chance . . . well, it was no skin off my nose. When Murray looked at me, I shrugged. I am not as sentimental as he is.

Murray looked back at the man and woman. I know he was having a great war: there was the law and then there was what was right, and they are not always as black and white as chess pieces. "You tell the police what happened to Kelley," my brother said, "and we'll tell them that we found Lynn-Marie out here trying to talk you out of running off. We won't mention the kidnapping. We won't mention the gun in your hand. They'll probably know we're lying, but they won't be able to prove anything—I don't think. That's what we'll do; that's how we'll handle the police."

Wayne grimly smiled and squeezed Lynn-Marie's shoulder; he was in for a helluva time.

Matthew came into the room then, Dun in his arms. "Aunt Lynn?" he said. When he saw me, he stopped, his eyes grow-

ing wide. "No," he said and spun around, running off back into the house.

I went after him, scooting by Lynn-Marie's wheelchair into the hall. Murray called to me, but again I wasn't listening. I hurried down the hall, passed the dining room, a half bath, and maybe what was a parlor, before I came to the stairs and raced up them. About halfway up, I stopped.

You're acting like a fool chasing a little boy like this, I thought. Then I thought: so? and continued up the stairs in a mad rush.

I looked in all the rooms, behind the shower curtain, under a couple of beds, in the hamper; I clapped my hands at times, hoping Dun would give a yelp for help or something, but there was no response and I gave up. I went back down to Murray.

"That was a fine display of maturity, Al," he said.

The kid's down here somewhere, I told him.

"Yes, well, we'll find him, don't worry. We're bigger than he is."

Wayne asked, "The dog is yours?"

I tapped my chest, mine, it was my dog.

"Dammit, is that what brought you back? We thought he'd picked the dog up in the back yard somewhere, and he

wouldn't leave quietly without him so we let him keep the thing and brought it with us. It's always the silly little things, isn't it?"

Murray said usually and I grunted.

"We'll get the dog back to you," said Wayne. "I'm sorry."

"Matthew loves that dog, though," said Lynn-Marie, laughing a little, sadly. "He played with him the entire time in the car and we haven't heard a sound from upstairs since we arrived. I've never seen him so sweet and gentle with an animal."

Yeah, well, neither had I. And too damn bad, I thought.

We heard cars in the drive. "That'll be the police," said Murray. "You two wait here. Let me get to them first. And remember," he said to Lynn-Marie, "you were here trying to talk Wayne out of running away, remember that."

"I will," she said. "Thank you. God bless you."

That would be my luck.

We met Lieutenant Quise out on the porch. As he walked towards us through the darkness to the steps, I had the slight hope he would drop his enormous weight on the third step and crash through up to his thick thigh, but he was too quick and observant and overstepped it just as we had.

"Goddammit, you two," he said by way of greeting, "what do you think you are leaving a note at a murder scene and then coming out here like vigilantes? Huh? What is this?"

Murray explained as only Murray can do: calmly, logically, and wonderfully deceptively. I stood there and nodded and smiled whenever Quise glanced at me, it was my pet shop smile and I could tell by the way he shifted his weight it made him uncomfortable.

"So the guy's in there?" said Quise, jabbing towards the house.

"Yes," said Murray. "I don't think he'll be a problem. The woman's with him, she'll keep him calm and cooperative."

"He didn't give you any trouble?" Quise waved his boys inside.

"No," said Murray. "None at all."

"Good. You two wait here. I'll need statements from you later on." He followed the two uniforms and the other detective, leaving us alone on the porch. I looked out over the yard, then farther out over the land, but it was too dark to see more than dark, oddly shaped forms.

And then I did something I don't often do: I asked Murray's opinion. I asked if he thought what we were doing was right.

He kicked a clod of dirt off the

porch, folded his arms, and leaned against the wooden porch support beam. "To be honest with you, Al, I'm not sure. I'd like to think it is, but I may be terribly wrong. I'm not thinking with my mind; I'm thinking with my gut, and that kind of thinking isn't always clearcut and definite.

"You think that way more often than I do. Look at your buying that dog. So you tell me. Is covering this up right?"

At first I started to think if it could be right, then stopped myself. Does it feel right? I asked. Does it *feel* right?

Yes, I told Murray, it's right.

One of the uniforms came out on the porch carrying Dun. "Ms. Wagner says this dog is yours? The boy had it."

He handed Dun to me. I took the pup, felt his softness, his wriggling life, his excitement and energy. A dog is such an alive animal, I thought. Alive like a little boy should be alive.

And there was Wayne Cousins, sacrificing his peace, maybe his freedom . . . I asked does it feel right. And holding Dun didn't.

I handed Dun back to the cop. I signed rapidly.

"Come again?" he said, bewildered.

"Al said," said Murray, "give the dog to the boy."

"Oh," said the cop. "Okay." He went back inside.

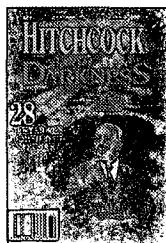
"That was nice of you, Al," said my brother.

I shrugged. Who was I to take a puppy from a boy, one who needed it more than I did, maybe. Everyone deserves a chance to be loved and be alive. Of course I didn't tell Murray this because it sounds pretty corny, kinda old, and he would have loved it because he loves that kind of thing, and I don't want him to know we think along the same lines sometimes, God help me. But it is true. Everyone deserves the *chance* to be loved; that was why what we had done was right. That was why I let the kid have Dun.

And that was why bright and early the next day I was at the Humane Society looking for another pup. A mutt this time, a mutt I named Second Shot, for both the boy and me.

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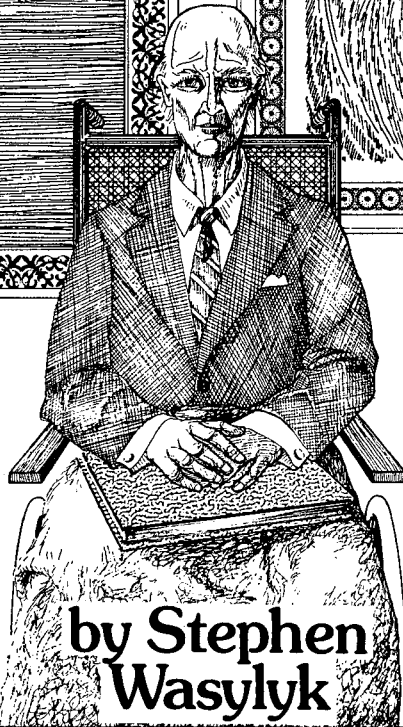
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The Search for Olga Bateau



by Stephen
Wasylyk

ODBERT

Scrolling the column he had just written, Conner critically scanned the sentences as they appeared on his CRT screen, a touch of apprehension tightening his stomach.

Something was missing. Even though the words had been strung together smoothly and professionally, whatever magic he'd had was gone, like the faded skills of an athlete. But a mind doesn't weary and slow

with age the way muscle does. The ability was still there. He simply had forgotten how to tap it.

He reached for the phone automatically when it rang, his eyes still on the screen.

The voice was thin and gravely with age.

"Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Whit Conner?"

"You do," said Conner, "but terming it a pleasure may be premature."

"I've been reading your columns for years. I like the way you think."

"Very nice of you to call and tell me," said Conner cautiously. Compliments were always welcome, so long as they weren't stretched out or a prelude to a request for money.

"My name is Hapford. I'd like to discuss something with you. A mystery which occurred many years ago."

Conner suppressed a groan. He didn't need this now.

"Mr. Hapford, as a reader of my column, you know I write about what I see before me today. The puzzles and bitter-sweet memories of yesterday I leave to others."

"Indulge me for a moment, Mr. Conner. I have always understood that every writer injects something of himself into his work, and if you read enough of it, you can form a

conclusion as to his character. If the theory is wrong, I have misinterpreted yours and I am wasting time when I have none to waste. However, if it is even partially correct, you will be at 610 Baysmore Road this afternoon at two. Good day, Mr. Conner. It has been nice talking to you."

The phone went dead.

Conner leaned back. He often thought many of the strange calls and letters were inspired by the photo at the head of his column as much as by what he wrote. The camera had turned his rather ordinary face with a slightly too-big nose into one so thin and bony it was almost fierce, the eyes glowing and holding a challenge.

The owner of that elderly voice hadn't been lying about reading him for years. Anyone who had would know damned well he'd never resist an invitation like that, even if he suspected it was from an irate reader who wanted nothing more than to break his fingers. Almost every column spawned a few of those.

He flipped through the street directory on his desk. Baysmore Road was well out in the affluent suburbs. A pleasant ride, and the way he'd been writing lately, a few broken fingers might be considered a blessing by some of the paper's

subscribers. Not to mention Grainger. The editor had been looking at him out of the corner of his eye lately.

Baysmore Road had been there a great deal longer than many of the small scale palaces along it that could only be glimpsed through the trees. The people who had built these homes originally couldn't have been concerned about the size of the monthly mortgage payments because they probably owned the banks.

Six ten had a pair of stone columns flanking the driveway entrance, the number and the name "Hapford" showing through the patina of the bronze plaque on one.

Conner turned in and followed winding macadam he thought would never end, a black strip that didn't carry enough traffic to discourage weeds from sprouting through the cracks and edged by an untended forest laced with underbrush and fallen trees.

The driveway climbed. And climbed. And after a sharp turn burst forth onto a carefully trimmed lawn surrounding a peaked and turreted mass of brownstone and brick.

He stepped from the car and looked up. Queen Victoria would have felt right at home. He'd

always admired the style and this was one of the finest he'd ever seen, a little weathered now and showing its age, but still saying exactly what the man who had built it wanted said—he had taste and money.

Weeds might grow in the driveway, but the sweeping lawn and blossoming flower beds were well tended, as though it was a private enclave deliberately hidden.

A waist-high stone wall flanked the driveway, broken by a tier of flagstone steps that led to a wide terrace of grass, another tier of steps beyond it leading up to a columned and arched portico framing double doors of oak.

Conner started climbing. It would take one helluva throw by the paperboy to reach that portico.

Fronted by a bed of flowers, another wall at the rear of the grass terrace sheltered a kneeling man working at the soil with a trowel.

"Afternoon," said Conner when the man looked up. "Are you responsible for all of this?" He waved at the lawn and the flowers.

The man unfolded a gaunt frame until he was upright, boot-camp-short gray hair emphasizing prominent ears. "I am."

"Very beautiful," said Con-

ner. "Would you be Mr. Hapford?"

The man grinned. "You'll find Mr. Hapford inside, but it's always nice to be mistaken for a wealthy man. I'm Ross, the gardener. Are you interested in gardening?"

"Lord no. I wouldn't know a peony from a weed, but I know beauty and tender loving care by someone who knows his business."

Ross placed the backs of his hands on his hips and looked out over the grounds.

Conner hadn't realized how high the driveway had taken him. The house was on top of the highest hill in the vicinity and he could see for miles over the tops of the trees. Below them, the tended lawn and strategically placed flower beds were confined to a short radius from the house; the balance of the hill was turned over to nature to do with as she pleased. Conner wondered if Hapford was running out of money.

Ross sighed. "You should have seen it when I was a boy. We had ten gardeners then. It was like this to the bottom. I'm alone now and I can only do so much and J.A. wants it that way. He says to take care of only what he can see and let the rest go, and his eyes get a little worse each year. Which isn't too bad, I suppose, since I'm los-

ing a little range myself."

Conner smiled. "Mr. Ross, when you get down to four roses before the front door, I'm sure they'll be the finest four roses in the county."

Ross grinned and lifted a hand. "I'll drink to that. And listen, when you go inside, don't let Madame Defarge scare you."

Conner chuckled. The trip was worth it already. He'd found a great gardener with a sense of humor who read Dickens.

An intricate, flowery, etched border in the glass left enough clear to see the large, white-uniformed woman approach out of the shadows inside.

The aged voice on the phone evidently required the services of a nurse. This one was heavy-set, broad-beamed, and middle-aged; the type no one argues with, especially the patient.

"Mr. Hapford is expecting me," said Conner.

She peered over a pair of half spectacles. "You're that writer?"

The tone said she was no fan of his, but then she might have greeted Shakespeare the same way. Some people regard a writer as only a step or two above a used car salesman or a politician.

Conner smiled. "I seldom use dirty words. Does that help?"

She sniffed and beckoned.

In the large center hall,

paintings hung side by side on gleaming mahogany paneling and marched up the angled staircase. A crystal chandelier gleamed with light captured and reflected by hundreds of facets, and the parquet floor edged with contrasting oak was as smooth and unworn as the day it was installed. It had seen less traffic than the driveway.

Waiting in the doorway of a large room, the nurse eyed him as though she expected him to walk off with the massive grandfather clock in the corner.

"People pay money for tours through homes like this," he said.

"You're not on tour," she snapped. "Step this way."

The room fulfilled the promise of the hall. One paneled wall held more paintings, hung from eye level to the ceiling. The furniture was dark and massive and art in itself, the fabric coverings rich.

The rug was so soft and deep Conner felt he was floating as he approached the little old man, robe across his lap, seated in an ancient oak wheelchair with a high wicker back.

Almost bald, face deeply lined, shriveled and thin, he had to be at least eighty, but he sat erect, slightly hazed blue eyes peering at Conner. Lap robe and wheelchair notwithstanding, he was clean shaven

and wore a starched shirt, tie, and brown tweed jacket. All dressed up and nowhere to go, but a gentleman never received a guest without wearing a coat and tie.

Behind him was a huge fireplace, a grand piano in the corner to his left, and a massive mahogany desk, pedestals curved and inlaid with contrasting burl, placed to take advantage of the light from the french doors to his right. Beyond the doors were a red brick terrace, a wrought-iron railing, and a bulky sculpture which Conner took to be that of a woman, backed by a grove of pines.

The giant-size Florence Nightingale said, "Mr. Conner," as though hoping the man would tell her to throw him out.

He smiled and flicked a set of bony fingers at her in dismissal.

"You are eight minutes late, Mr. Conner."

"Not really. I didn't anticipate such a long driveway and I spent the rest of the time admiring your home."

"I had an idea you'd appreciate it. After my imminent departure, it will become a museum for others to enjoy." Hapford indicated a chair. "We receive so few visitors I forget my manners. Can we get you some refreshment?"

Conner shook his head. "No, thank you, sir. What I would like is the reason you invited me here. You mentioned a mystery. Since you call it that, I assume it is an incident which has never been explained and if you tell me it is of an occult nature, I'm leaving."

"You misjudge me. I called you because you write about people, not the spirit world."

"Every newsman does."

"Most prefer only those who make news. You, on the other hand, are interested in people whose lives would otherwise never be noticed."

"You place yourself in that category?"

"Good heavens, no. You may indeed write something about this, but that is a very minor consideration." Hapford waved. "You'll find a book on the desk. While I'd like to sit and discuss it with you, I no longer have the strength to converse for any length of time. I'd like you to take it with you. Go through its contents. Check the material against other sources if you wish. Then return tomorrow at the same time. With the preliminaries disposed of, no long discussion will be necessary. Is that agreeable?"

The tone said take it or leave it.

"Let me examine the book," said Conner.

The polished desktop was bare except for a lamp and a large, flat volume bound in red leather.

He leafed through. Newspaper clippings, notes, typewritten pages, photographs. The clippings were laminated with clear plastic to preserve the newsprint and the pages were case bound. It certainly wasn't a typical family album. It was more like a collection of memorabilia on which the collector had lavished a great deal of time and money and perhaps, like other projects important only to their creators, of no interest or value to anyone else once they were gone.

The first clipping was dated October 12, 1935, multi-headlined: *Sculptor's Wife Vanishes While Husband Works*. Below that: *House in Disarray; Intruders Suspected*. And below that: *Foul Play Feared; Police Seek Information*.

Hapford was right. He was holding two hours or more of reading.

"The woman was never found?"

Hapford nodded.

"You need a detective, not a writer."

"You'll find the reports of several."

"I'm sure you know there are writers who would jump at the chance to go through this material and discuss it with you."

Instead you call someone like me and indicate that telling the story is not your purpose. You've lost me before the dance has begun, Mr. Hapford. Why me?"

Hapford smiled. "All will be clear in time. You have nothing to lose by reading what is in the book. However, the choice is yours. You can leave without it, taking with you only the memory of an enigmatic old man in a beautiful home."

The challenge was in his voice again.

Conner weighed the book in his hand. Even if he didn't know why, going through it would please Hapford and he had no real reason to refuse.

He tucked it under his arm. "I'll be happy to read your book. Now, I suggest you get some rest. I'll see myself out, and tell your large health-care person not to worry. I haven't stolen anything in some time."

Hapford chuckled. "Don't mind Mrs. Smallcross. Her only interest is my welfare. She thinks visitors tire me out. She's correct."

Outside, Conner placed the book on the seat and looked up at the house. Ross had disappeared. Mrs. Smallcross was staring at him through the glass of the door, probably making certain the clock or one of the paintings wasn't projecting from the trunk.

He drove absently, his mind on the small figure in the wheelchair. Assuming that an eighty-year-old man would be up to anything at all, what was Hapford up to?

While his eyes were failing, his brain certainly wasn't. He might forget where he'd placed his false teeth now and then, but Conner wouldn't want to get into a knock-down, drag-out argument with him.

The three columns he wrote each week were about people he met as he walked around the city; human interest with the slight twist and sardonic humor that made him what he was. No one was more aware that what he wrote would probably end up lining the bottom of a bird cage or a kitty litter box the next day, so he tried not to take himself too seriously. Let the reporters looking for the big story, or the political pundits who always knew how the country should be run, scramble for the Pulitzers. He was content to take his paycheck and go home after doing exactly what Hapford had said, spotlighting a few lives that would otherwise never be noticed. Perhaps Hapford would be one of them, but if he was, he could see the old man deliberately tearing the column to shreds. That wasn't what he wanted at all.

The question was—what did he want?

He dropped the car off in the parking garage across from the white-towered newspaper building and, Hapford's book under his arm, took the elevator to the editorial offices.

The cubicle with SOCIETY EDITOR lettered on the door had a card jammed into the slit between the frame and the glass with the name SUSAN FRAMLING inked in as though her occupancy was temporary.

The blonde young woman typing at the computer terminal alongside the desk glanced up, eyebrows arching above blue eyes. She looked like a society page editor. The short hair, glasses, and silk blouse were timeless styles—and expensive.

"Hi, Susan," said Conner.

She frowned. "What happened to your usual, I'm-free-Saturday-afternoon-Susan-let's-get-married routine?"

"After your twenty-fifth refusal, I sensed you might be trying to tell me something. From now on, I'll simply worship your intelligence and beauty silently and from afar, locking deep within me the flames of passion and desire."

"Good Lord," she said thoughtfully, "he's taken to reading romance novels. They're for women, Conner."

"Be cruel. Condemn me simply because I seek solace from this heartless world, my nights wells of torturous darkness where I spend agonizing hours longing for someone like you to make my blood course fiercely through my entire being as we love madly and without restraint and drive each other to heights of soul throbbing ecstasy never before experienced. Your callousness is enough to make me weep, but before I break into uncontrollable sobbing, does the name Hapford conjure up images of blue blood?"

"So blue, it's almost purple. Why?"

"I just had an interview with the man and am looking for a little background."

"You're lucky. Up until three months ago, I had never heard the name until I attended a party where I learned a great deal. What's the information worth?"

"A sticky bun, a cup of coffee, and my admiring glances."

"No wonder your nights are wells of torturous darkness. Hasn't anyone ever told you that diamonds are a girl's best friend?"

"Next to sticky buns. Admit it."

She smiled. "With those words, she realized he had found the key to her heart, had solved the age-old mystery of unlock-

ing a woman's deepest desires. I'll take a raincheck, Conner. At the party the conversation centered around the days when the society page meant something. With no television, commercial aviation still a novelty, long train rides a complete bore, and every motor trip an expedition, the wealthy and well-to-do stayed home and entertained each other, all duly reported in the paper. Hapford's name was brought up by one of the elderly women there, who was in her teens at the time. Julius Antonius—"

"Julius Antonius?"

"His father was a Latin scholar but Julius Antonius was majoring in living it up. He was well on his way to graduating with honors when he ran into a beauty named Olga Bateau."

Conner thought of the clipping in the book.

"Who was married to a sculptor and who disappeared."

She frowned. "You know the story?"

"No. I just happened to know that."

"Anyway, Hapford supposedly was having an affair with Olga Bateau and the night she disappeared, the two lovers told Bateau that she intended to leave the next day and file for divorce. On the way home, Hapford, undoubtedly filled with champagne and jubilation, ran

his car into a tree in his own driveway and was in the hospital for weeks. His father died of a heart attack which was attributed to his accident, and if that wasn't enough, Olga Bateau was kidnapped that same night and never seen again. When he recovered, Hapford accused Bateau of faking the abduction and killing her. Bateau, in turn, accused Hapford of being whacko from the head injury he'd received in the accident, or of lying because he felt the sculpture he'd commissioned wasn't worth the money he'd paid for it, or both. Furthermore, a man testified he'd seen a woman answering Mrs. Bateau's description in a car with two men only a few miles away from the house at approximately the time she disappeared, and that the woman had been very pale and appeared frightened."

"Which reinforced the abduction theory."

"And left Hapford standing in the cold after having bared his soul to the delight of the tabloids. He never could prove anything against Bateau. Bateau even denied the two of them had come to him that night and told him his wife intended to divorce him. Hapford couldn't prove that either. After the fuss and accusations died down, Hapford withdrew from

society, filling what I understand is a magnificent mansion with priceless art, discouraging all visitors, and labeled as a nut by the people who know he exists."

Her eyes narrowed. "Exactly what are you up to, Conner? People like you don't talk to men like Hapford more than once a century."

"You're right. He must be eighty if a day."

She wagged an index finger at the book under his arm. "What's that?"

"Something he asked me to look over. I guess you'd call it his personal journal of the incident."

Her eyes gleamed. "Let's talk bribery, Conner. I have to see that."

"As much as I'd like to sit and hold hands as we go through it together, I could never concentrate with you so close. How could I keep from staring at the angelic downiness of your delicate white skin, the throbbing pulse in your throat as you struggle to suppress the desire you feel for me, and the delightfully obtuse earlobe which drives me wild? Besides, I'm sure he meant the book for my eyes only."

She shook her head. "I don't suppose I'll ever understand how a nut like you can see into people's souls, much less write

about them, but I suspect that underneath the smart-talk exterior is a real nice guy. You should let him out once in a while, Conner. In the meantime—"

She pointed at the door. "Out." "As your humble slave, I can but obey."

He was at the door when she called.

"What in the hell is an obtuse earlobe anyway?"

He grinned. "The description can only be murmured in the dark confines of a bedroom."

He ran into Grainger in the corridor. The editor held up a hand.

"I read your column, Whit."

"And?"

"Passable, but not the Whit Conner we all know and love. Have some sort of problem I can help with?"

"I wish I did. Let's hope for something better next time."

Grainger looked thoughtful. "I can only say that so many times, Whit."

It was well past dinner when he closed the book. With Susan's story as background, it made far more sense than if he'd simply plunged in.

The police, with other things to do, had eventually dropped the investigation. Hapford hadn't.

Over a period of years, he'd

had three separate private investigators search for Olga Bateau. They had been no more successful than the police. One had either been very thorough or had enjoyed spending Hapford's money. He turned in a report the length of a short novel which said nothing. All extended the possibility that Bateau had arranged the abduction and the subsequent murder of his wife, but none was willing to declare unequivocally that Olga Bateau was dead.

Hapford must have commissioned someone to save every reference in the papers not only to Mrs. Bateau but to her husband, including the one seven years later when a judge ruled Olga Bateau officially dead and Bateau free to remarry.

Bateau hadn't enjoyed wedded bliss long. His new wife killed him six months later with one of his own mallets. The details of her horrendous marriage must have been pitiful enough to earn her an innocent verdict at a time when juries were still inclined to believe that marriage vows included the right of a man to beat his wife.

Fifty years. Much too long ago to even hazard a guess, but Conner sensed there was an answer somewhere between the lines.

Aside from a few passing sentences in the stories about the accident and his father's death, there was nothing in the book about Hapford himself, which meant a great deal had been left out.

He could get the rest from the newspaper files, but this had always been a conservative, family-style publication. Fifty years ago, five other papers had been competing for readers, each covering the news in its own way.

Six viewpoints. If he couldn't come up with an angle from those, there was none.

Three hours later, he emerged from the public library and stood on the steps, breathing deeply.

The city was dark, the night soft, the boulevard lamps surrounded by misty halos.

Checking all that microfilm had been a waste of time. He'd learned nothing more. If there was an answer, it was still between the lines and couldn't be read without a key, and if there was a key it was in Hapford's hands.

He'd accommodated Hapford only to be polite, but he'd spent far more time than he'd anticipated. He really didn't give a damn what had happened to Olga Bateau. That had been Hapford's problem. He'd lived with it and should have died.

with it and left him alone.

He'd drop the book off tomorrow and get out of there.

Mrs. Smallcross seemed even more unpleasant when she ushered him inside the next afternoon.

If the nurse had undergone no change overnight, Hapford had. The brightness of the day before was replaced by a pale weariness and his hand trembled when it rose to meet Conner's.

"I assume you went through the book thoroughly, Mr. Conner, and no discussion is necessary. Did you reach any conclusions?"

"Since Olga Bateau's body was never found, doubt will always exist that Bateau killed her. At this late date, there is no answer."

"If a man persists, the truth will always be found." Hapford motioned. "Wheel me out onto the terrace, if you will."

The terrace was wide and long, the wrought-iron railing ending at a set of broad steps. Wearing a blue baseball cap, Ross leaned with folded arms against the railing, a heavy sledge beside him.

Before them, evergreens accented the weathered gray as they curved around the sculpture, high in the center and de-

scending as they swept toward the front, while twin beds of red and white roses completed a circle bisected by a flagstone walk that led to the statue and formed a patio before it, a small concrete bench off to one side.

The grove was obviously a shrine dedicated to the statue.

"Quite lovely, isn't it?" asked Hapford.

With those eyes of his, he had to be speaking from memory.

"That was Bateau's commission?"

Hapford nodded. "Many consider it only an ugly pile of cement. What do you see, Mr. Conner?"

The sculpture was blocky, almost crude, lacking detail, more form than shape and studded with small, polished stones, yet Conner thought he could see the image of a woman there; a sad woman, hands clasped before her, head bowed; as though what he saw was beneath the surface and waiting to be released by the sculptor's chisels.

He felt ice ripple down his spine. "I'm not quite sure."

"I've felt the same way for fifty years," said Hapford quietly.

The ice spread into Conner's stomach. "How did Bateau work?"

"He spent a great deal of time building his forms. Then he mixed and poured the concrete

himself. Once he began, he couldn't stop until it was finished since the concrete had to be of the same texture and consistency throughout. That was the point he made, you see. Busy mixing and pouring, he was aware of nothing else, so that it was quite possible for his house to be ransacked and his wife abducted while he worked in utter concentration. More than one person testified that it was not unusual for him to work through the night, completely unaware of what went on around him. If forced to stop, he would tear the form apart and reduce the work to rubble with a sledge."

"I think that if I had been you, I would have reduced this one to powder," said Conner slowly.

"Don't be so certain."

"Dammit, you had no choice!" Conner snapped.

Hapford's voice was thin and tired. "Think fifty years ago, Mr. Conner."

Conner's anger faded. The old man was right. He was thinking now, not then.

The sculpture had been commissioned, completed, and delivered. What happened to it was up to Hapford. If he smashed it and didn't find the body of Olga Bateau inside, he had nothing but his memories of the woman he loved to sustain him,

and finding nothing would prove nothing—she could be dead and buried elsewhere, or she might even still be alive.

If he did find her body, he would have the satisfaction of seeing Bateau convicted, but the sweetness of revenge couldn't last forever, the statue of the woman he loved would be gone, and worse—whatever slight hope he was clinging to that she was still alive would also be gone.

Either way, he'd lose.

"I apologize," said Conner. "On second thought, I'm not sure I would have done differently."

Hapford nodded. "I knew you'd understand. You see, I know you, Mr. Conner. I've admired your insight and depth and warmth for years, but lately the tenor of your columns has changed. I think I know why. You no longer seek the truth. You pursue the truth as you see it."

Conner suppressed the touch of irritation that criticism always brings.

"Maybe we should postpone this discussion to another day."

Mrs. Smallcross appeared and took up a position behind Hapford's chair, her eyes concerned.

The old man's voice was tired. "There are no more days left. I have traveled the road as far as medication and the tender care

of Mrs. Smallcross can take me, but I wished to make a point. The statue stands before you. So does the truth. With the sledge, you can destroy the sculpture in moments if that is where you believe the truth is. Mr. Ross will help you. Or you can walk away, certain that the truth is as you see it."

"Is this your way of getting me to smash the statue for your benefit?"

Hapford smiled. "Not mine. Yours. I already know the truth. It took me fifty years to discover it because I did what you have been doing. Certain that I was right, I looked no further."

His voice faded along with the smile as he leaned back against the yellowed wicker.

Suddenly aware of his stillness, Mrs. Smallcross touched his throat, held her fingers there for a moment, and looked at Ross, tears in her eyes. Ross slowly removed the blue baseball cap.

The nurse tucked the lap robe around Hapford tenderly as if it still mattered and wheeled him inside.

Shaken, Conner stared after her. It was as though Hapford had willed himself to stay alive until he talked to him.

No one else had known what was wrong with his columns and he'd been unable to put a finger on it himself, but the old

man had. You pursue the truth as you see it, he'd said, which meant he'd been injecting into those columns what he wished he saw, rather than what was actually there, and they had become contrived and flat.

He stepped from the terrace and studied the statue, painted by the sun with light and shadow. He was certain Olga Bateau was inside. Bateau had committed a perfect murder, sat back, and laughed at Hapford because he had known Hapford wouldn't have the nerve to destroy it. It was a perfectly reasonable explanation of why her body had never been found, but without smashing the sculpture, there would always be a slight doubt and Hapford had used that doubt to make him take a look at himself. He had, and was grateful.

He waved at Ross, took two steps toward his car, and stopped. Hapford hadn't said it had taken him fifty years to *realize* the truth. It had taken him fifty years to *discover* it. And Hapford had not been the sort of man who ignores the precise meaning of words.

He walked slowly around the semicircle of flowers and back again. The beds were two embracing arms held apart by the flagstone walk, the stones set precisely, filling the circular area before the sculpture with

a fan-like pattern that radiated from a rectangle in the center.

Conner stepped back. There was no logic in the rectangle.

In keeping with the circular pattern, the center should have been square so that it was equidistant from all edges.

He studied the shrine. If the centerpiece was not the sculpture but the rectangle, then the sculpture was positioned like—

A headstone.

Ice rippled down his spine again.

He turned to Ross. "He never knew?"

"Not until last week. He asked me to wheel him out. Mrs. Smallcross usually did that, but she had to run into town. You see, no one else knew, so they would walk on the flagstones in the center. I could never do that. Walk on a grave. I steered him around them. He noticed. He sort of looked at them and then up at me and asked very quietly, 'What happened, Ross?'"

"What did happen?"

An errant blade of grass at the edge of a flower bed had escaped the shears. Ross replaced his cap, knelt, broke off the blade, and chewed it thoughtfully.

"What took place before the accident, I have no idea, but he hadn't been alone, as everyone thought. She was with him. He

liked to drive fast, it was a rainy fall night, and the driveway was covered with wet leaves. He skidded off the curve. She was killed, he was knocked unconscious. The only people here were his father and me, a kid of fifteen. My dad was the gardener then. The crash brought both of us running. Real nightmare for a kid. For anyone, when it comes to that. His father sent me to the house to phone for an ambulance, but I knew, and I guess he did, too, that it would take an hour to get here. When I came running back, he said, 'We have to bury her, Ross.'"

Ross spat out the remnants of the blade. "Understand, I was fifteen, and old Mr. Hapford was a sort of god to everyone who worked here. That was the height of the Depression and if you had a job, you had to keep it because there were no others, and plenty of men would be happy to take my place making seven dollars a week helping my father on the estate. He said we have to bury her and I said sure, Mr. Hapford. If there were any questions about what we were doing, he'd have to answer, not me. We carried her here. My father had already started a flower bed so the earth was soft and loose, and no one can dig faster than a scared kid. By the time the ambulance

came, she had been buried."

Conner stared at him. "What in the hell could his father have been thinking?"

Ross shrugged. "Family name, that sort of thing, I suppose. Name splashed all over the newspapers. Scandal. Drunken son out with married woman. Kills her. He was real straight-laced. We'll never know. There we were, covered with mud and standing in the rain but the ambulance men never looked at us and I was wondering what the old man could say to his son if he didn't die, when he sort of coughs and keels over and they took him along. I couldn't tell if J.A. was dead, but I was sure the old man was, so if there was any explaining to do, it was going to be me."

"You should have said something right then," said Conner slowly.

Ross smiled. "Remarkable how good hindsight is. I should have but I didn't. No one ever asked and I never volunteered. After all, what could a kid know? The statue was delivered while he was in the hospital. I told my father that J. A. had told me he wanted it here, with the trees and the flower beds and the flagstone, making it all up as I went along. J. A. was in a coma for a few days and when he came out of it, he couldn't remember a thing about

that night. It always did remain a blank. I'm sure you've heard of cases like that. Guilt blockage or something, they call it."

Conner nodded.

"Well, hell, I didn't know that at the time. I thought he'd surely remember and then I'd tell him, but he never did and I kept my mouth shut. I think he and Mrs. Bateau must have talked about telling her husband, and to fill in that gap in his memory, he told himself it actually happened. That's why he accused Bateau. You can understand why a fifteen-year-old kid in my position wasn't going to stand up and tell him he was wrong. Four years later the war came along. I went to Canada and joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. I sometimes wondered if I was killed would the secret die with me or would someone stumble across it someday, but I wasn't and when I came back, he'd accepted it and lived with it so there was no point to putting him through it all again. Maybe somehow he knew, which was why he shut himself off. When I told him last week, he said, 'Thank you, Ross,' as though I'd done him a favor."

"Maybe you did," said Conner.

"Only we two know now. Have anything in mind?"

Conner looked at the shrine. "I think not."

Ross stooped, snipped off a rose, and held it out. It was a deep purplish red, blue toward the bottom.

"Developed it myself. I call it a Bateau Blue. J. A. liked that."

Conner turned the rose over in his fingers. "So do I."

Susan looked up and smiled.

"Find out what Hapford wanted?"

"To give me a lesson in humility. He called it looking for the truth, which was his gentlemanly way of telling me I'd become a fat-headed bore."

"Three very loud cheers for Hapford."

"He'll never know of your approval. He died at approximately two thirty, and I regret that very much. I'd have liked to have known him better."

He placed the rose on her desk. "For you. It's called a Bateau Blue."

She breathed its fragrance with closed eyes. "It's beautiful. Thank you, Conner. But what about Olga—"

"Care to trade in that sticky

bun raincheck for a dinner?"

She studied him for a moment. "I have the feeling that it won't be necessary to bring my mace."

"All we'll do is talk like two sensible adults."

She smiled. "Sounds like a dull evening, but I'll be pleased to accept, Mr. Conner."

He met Grainger in the corridor again and held up a hand before the editor could speak.

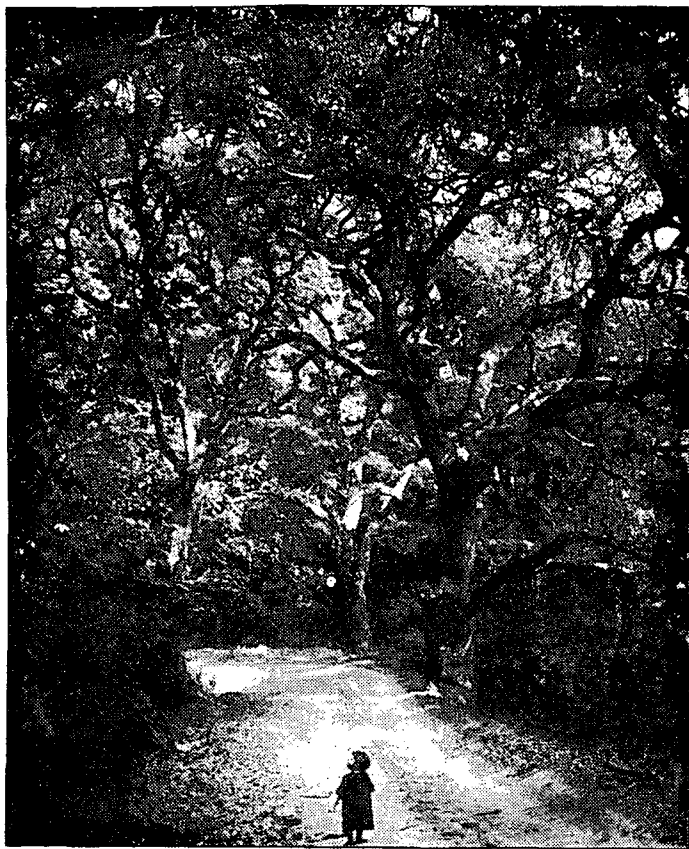
"Don't derail my train of thought." In his office, he slid behind his keyboard.

All of the people who had searched for Olga Bateau through the years had never thought to ask a gangly, fifteen-year-old kid if he knew anything. If they had, the kid would have made news.

He didn't write about people who made news. He wrote about people who would otherwise never be noticed.

Like a gaunt genius of a gardener with prominent ears and a blue baseball cap who grew blue roses, whose work few people had ever seen because it was on top of a hill where time had stood still for fifty years.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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Hansel . . . where are you? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the July Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Prairie Heat

by Jas. R. Petrin



Illustration by Joanna Roy

In the thick dark heat of that dry prairie night the spade fell and scraped, fell and scraped, while the locusts, too, scraped on in their thousands in the firebrick dust, under the midnight sunflowers, all around the strawberry patch.

"God in his heaven!" Mrs. Mayview breathed.

She paused to draw a thick damp hand over her eyes and let her breath catch up with her. Her spade handle sloped down and away into the pit, no more than a trench in the baked breast of the earth, barely as long as herself, and knee-deep.

There was no moon. A silver dusting of stars was her only light. But even the stars seemed no more than an afterglow of the daytime heat, a warning of yet another long day of fire soon to begin. The shallow hole looked bottomless in the thin light.

"Good enough," said Mrs. Mayview to the sunflowers and the locusts, and clambered out. She stood for a moment with one fist in the small of her back to press a cramp away.

"This ground's roasting in harder," she said. "Or I'm getting weaker, or the spade's getting duller, or the devil's got me by the elbows, I don't know what. But the others weren't this much trouble, I'll swear to that."

She stepped to the edge of the strawberry patch where the sunflowers sprang up suddenly in a bristling wall.

"I'm ready for you now," she apologized; "sorry about the wait."

She stooped and reached in among the sunflower stalks, taking a good firm grip on a pair of skinny ankles.

And up by the porch a barn owl swooped on feathered wings to take a mouse.

Nine A.M.

The heat was already impossible. It filled the halls and rooms of the tinderbox house with a sullen smoldering presence. It had weight. It was something to wade through. It pressed around Deborah Mayview, resisting her as she slowly descended the stairs and slip-slipped into the kitchen.

"Another hot one," Ma said, which was just what she said every morning, without looking up. She faced the red-ringed stove with a fierce resolution, one hand spread across a broad hip, the other wooden-spooning a pan of eggs.

Deborah had no comment. She lowered herself into a chair. She didn't care at all about the heat any more. She didn't care if the sun caught the sky on fire and burned the prairie up—in fact, that might suit her very well. Thousand mile sheets of dry wheat and

sunflowers aflame, barns booming up in quick huge flashes of orange fury, farm roads coiling and shriveling, and over it all, a mile high, the devil rubbing his hands like a boy at a bonfire and laughing. Oh, it would suit Deborah, all right. Suit her just fine. Especially now.

There was a calendar from the Crocus Restaurant on the wall, showing a cool craggy snow-covered peak, and she stared at it.

"Tom's gone," she said helplessly. She knew she was inviting attack but it had to be said.

"I warned you," Ma pronounced. Her back looked as solid as beef. Her heavy sunburnt arms bulged from her sleeveless blouse. "Tried to warn you, didn't I?"

"I looked in his room. His bed's all made up. His things are gone."

"I warned you."

"He could have said something last night. He could have explained. He didn't even tell me, Ma."

"'Course not. What did you expect from a drifter like that—and a city boy, too?" Ma's shoulders heaved a great sigh. "Same as the others. Don't know why you take up with them. Told you last time to stop inviting them back to this house. I wish to heaven you'd quit that job up at the Crocus, so you wouldn't meet such riffraff. You know what Mr. Pomerance says about working in cafes—the Bible's against it."

Quit and do what, Ma? Deborah thought. Sit around in this two-story oven and bake all day like you? Bake and bake until I swell up like yeast into a middle-aged loaf? No, Ma. Not me. I'm getting away. I'll find another Tom—somebody, anybody who'll take me away, away, far away from here. To some cold blue ocean, maybe. Or to the mountains where even in summer the snow lies in drifts against the cool green grass . . . She broke off her muse to find herself staring at the calendar again.

But here was Ma was starting in. And it was much too hot to be chafed against things. Especially with your nerve-endings rubbed raw to begin with. Something flared in Deborah suddenly, like a match.

"They weren't riffraff, Ma! Not one of them. And I don't care what Mr. Pomerance said!"

"Then more fool you is all I can say. He's got wisdom, that Mr. Pomerance. *I'd* never question his judgment on a worldly thing. Not me."

Deborah was tired of the praises that were forever sung about their wealthy, single neighbor, the man who owned land by the

section all around—the man who had domineered his wife into an early grave, which is what Mrs. Bryce said up at the Crocus when she was in a generous mood.

"Oh, Ma, what do you really know about Mr. Pomerance?"

"I know plenty," Ma said with a sly shoulder glance. "Plenty."

"He's only a farmer, Ma. He's not the whole world, he's never even seen the world. How can anybody know about life when they've barely even peeked out of their own little town?"

"He's peeked into the Book, though, hasn't he? It's all there, you know. All the knowledge you need." Ma scratched the side of her nose with the handle of the wooden spoon and studied the wall. "Oh, he certainly does know his scriptures, our Mr. Pomerance does. Peeked into them more than a few times, all right." She considered a moment, head tipped to one side. "And he's so awfully rich, too."

Deborah got up and splashed coffee into a cup as if she were scalding an enemy.

"You're starting in again, Ma! I'm not interested in him. I don't care if he owns the prairie from Saskatoon to Kansas. I don't care if he's as rich as . . . as Solomon. He scares me—you know the stories they tell about him. And anyway, he's old. I'm young. I need young people around me, Ma, can't you see that?"

Ma glanced back over one elbow with a hurt expression on her face. "Thanks a lot. Very flattering, you are."

"Oh, Ma—I didn't mean you. It's just that—"

Ma clunked eggs and bacon down in front of Deborah.

"Eat your breakfast."

"Aren't you having any, Ma?"

"Guess I don't feel like it now. After being insulted."

"I said I was sorry, Ma." Deborah pushed her plate away. "If you won't eat, *I* won't eat."

Ma studied her a moment through heavy-lidded eyes.

"You better eat, Ma. You don't look so good. Aren't you sleeping properly?"

Ma stared at the bacon hungrily. "I suppose I *could* eat something. Guess I'm a *bit* worn out. It's just this heat." She helped herself to some breakfast—a generous portion. "And don't be going round the house all afternoon in your bra today either, Debbie, you're almost spilling out of it now. I invited Mr. Pomerance to dinner, and he just might show up early. He's too holy for such sights." She shoved a forkful of eggs into her mouth, reconsidered and said through it, mumbling, "Though it mightn't hurt to wear

a tight top, I suppose. But not too tight. He's a redhead—they're hot-blooded, you know."

Ma was right. Mr. Pomerance did show up early.

He arrived a whole hour early, at the very hottest hour of the day; and under the beating sun his hair wasn't red, it was orange.

It was a fierce bristle of hair, wild and unmanageable. It raged across the top of his head like a prairie fire, and lapped at his ears in sharp tufted tongues, and the back of his neck was burnt crimson with it. He was a full and heavy person, much like Ma, and carried himself carefully, like someone accustomed to having his own way. He had a strong, sometimes kindly face, and a boil over one eye.

Deborah, still in her underwear and glancing out the window, spotted his new yellow pickup roll in, and ran upstairs to pull on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Her hand hovered over her open drawer, then dived down to choose the tightest she could find. Maybe, she thought, if Ma's right, I can give him a heart attack. Maybe I can get him so heated he'll burn right up on the spot—nothing left but two wisps of smoke curling up from two empty shoes.

When she came downstairs both Ma and Mr. Pomerance were sitting on the porch in the only shade there was. Mr. Pomerance was drinking ginger beer; and to be neighborly, so was Ma; but of course, Debbie knew, she'd have slipped a secret splash of gin into hers.

Ma said, without turning to look at her, "Mr. Pomerance is telling me all about the book of Joshua, dear."

"Again?"

"Your Ma likes the book of Joshua, Debbie," Mr. Pomerance said. After one first quick glance—he was *trying* not to look too closely at Debbie—his face was as red as his shirt.

"Have a heart attack, Mr. Pomerance," Debbie whispered.

"It's got action," Ma said, "all that smoting and smiting." Her eyes blinked dreamily. "All that vengeance. *Those* were the good old days. Not like now, eh, Mr. Pomerance?"

Retribution—an eye for an eye. It was a subject dear to Mr. Pomerance, as Ma well knew. At the mention of it he was able to tear his attention away from Debbie, though he had to twist in his chair to do it.

"It's scandalous nowadays, Mrs. Mayview," he said, "all this codding of the modern criminal. Air conditioning and stereo music. Tape-recording televisions is what they have now, and *those* kind

of movies to watch, if you can believe it. Prison nowadays is not a punishment at all."

"Have you ever been to prison, Mr. Pomerance?" Deborah asked.

"And weekends off, they get," Ma went on, "and going to football games, and taking college degrees—things no hardworking farmer—or farmer's wife—can afford. Of course, he hasn't been to prison, Debbie. Don't be rude."

"I drove by a prison once," Mr. Pomerance said with gravity. "That was an experience. An education." A fly crawled on his arm.

"There you are," said Ma. She touched Mr. Pomerance's knee and the fly lifted and settled again. "Debbie's *never* driven by a prison."

"I live in one," Deborah said under her breath.

"Debbie's an innocent thing, Mr. Pomerance."

"Criminals have a few rows of brick all around to hold them in and I've got nine hundred miles of wheat and sunflowers. Don't tell *me* you drove by a prison."

They didn't hear her. Ma was pressing Mr. Pomerance about Joshua again, about some place called Gilgal. "A *hill* of the little things, Mr. Pomerance? I wonder if it's still there. I wonder if they tour people out to it now." She giggled. "Oh, I think I'd like to see a sight like that . . ."

Deborah stared into the distance, past the baked, paint-flaking railings, past the silent simmering yard, past the grey, warped, slab-sided barn, and over the forever sea of fierce yellow fire that was the sunflowers. She wondered if there were other young girls out leaning on fly-specked screen doors, thinking about the highway that tore itself loose from the suffocating prairie and ran away fast to the ice-tipped mountains and the cool deep sea.

She suddenly turned and pulled the door open again.

"Where are you going?" Ma said.

"I'm going in to work."

"You mean to the Crocus?" Ma said rising, her face puckering with annoyance. "But it's your day off, Debbie, and I've arranged things special and we've got Mr. Pomerance here to supper—"

Mr. Pomerance muttered, "It *is* Sunday."

"People have to eat even on Sundays, Mr. Pomerance," Debbie called, "just like you came here to do."

The screen slammed on their pursuing voices, and Debbie bounded up the stairs to get her purse.

She knew the Crocus was going to be a hothouse as soon as she

rattled in over the gravel on her bicycle and saw the restaurant door propped open with a Pepsi Cola box. "Damn!" she said over her handlebars, "that stupid air conditioner's broken down again."

She propped her bike up against the drink machine—it hadn't worked in a week and a half—and went inside.

The place was an oven, all right. Mrs. Bryce, who managed the Crocus for a man in the city whom no one had ever seen, had the big box fan roaring on top of the cigarette machine, and it was fluttering its ribbon and drifting the stale air through the room like a slow hot wind. There was a scent of coffee and cooking oil and french-fried potatoes, and all the booths were empty.

Mrs. Bryce stuck her head out of the kitchen.

"Now here's someone that loves her work. Can't stay away, can you? Hi, sweetie, things getting you down around the house again? Your Ma pushing Mr. Pomerance down your neck again? I'll make you up a float, I know how you like them. Anyways, I would if the ice cream hadn't melted away to muck half an hour ago."

She came around the end of the bar, smiling, to reach out and brush the hair from Deborah's eyes.

Mrs. Bryce lived alone above the store. A lonely woman abandoned here in the prairie vastness by a young man who had wanted to try farming a dozen years before. "George left," she would say, "after the first week of stone-picking took the skin off his hands, the second week pulled his back out, and the third week knocked him down flat with the sunstroke." Which was probably true, since Alice Ashton—the one who had stabbed herself to death, somehow, over that fool Harry Martins—said she had seen him getting on the bus one night with a cowboy hat pulled down to his neck, bent like a hobo, and his hands swaddled up in gauze like two white mitts. "I'd of snuck off ahead of him," Mrs. Bryce was always quick to add, "except that he kept all the money."

Back then, a dozen years ago, she had been much like Deborah; a young girl wanting out. "After George took off, my soul got dragged away in pieces and bits with every eighteen-wheeler that growled out of here." And she might have managed it, too, having a pure, if tired, beauty even now. But she wouldn't trust a man again, not for anything. Not even for a lift to the coast, though it made people talk. So here she stayed. Her hand slipped to Deborah's waist.

"Where's that Tom you met last night?" Her eyes moved, searching Deborah's face. "Still in bed?"

It was almost five o'clock.

Deborah felt herself suddenly filled with the hurt of it, the tears swimming up, and she leaned into Mrs. Bryce's arms and sobbed.

"Oh, now, there!" Mrs. Bryce said, rocking her.

"He ran out on me," Deborah wept, "in the night. Not a word. Not a note. Just—gone!" She wept, and her tears burned down her cheeks and ran into Mrs. Bryce's scented hair. "He was going to take me along with him. He *promised!*"

Mrs. Bryce rocked her.

"Just like the others," she said, sounding like Ma. "Just like my George did to me. They're all the same. Men are no good, Debbie—you can't trust them a minute." She lifted the hem of her full uniform skirt and dabbed at Deborah's eyes with it. "I know what you're going through."

"I've got to get away, Mrs. Bryce. I hate it here—just *hate* it. And all Ma ever does is push that old Mr. Pomerance at me."

"God help you, dear. But I said you could come and live with me, didn't I. It's a small apartment I've got, but we get on so well. You'd be just upstairs from your job. And you'd be rid of that awful Mr. Pomerance—doesn't he have the hairiest hands?" She shuddered. "All farmers have hairy hands, it seems to me. It's biology, I figure—all of them stuck in a prairie prison, lusting like monks. My George had hairy hands, too, did I ever tell you that?"

"Yes, you did."

"Well it's true, dear." She stroked Deborah's arm. "So why don't you come and stay with me for a while, then?"

"I don't know."

There was a clunk from the corner where the men's room was, and Deborah pulled away, startled. Mrs. Bryce's face looked suddenly very sad. The heat had baked little crow's feet into the corners of her eyes. "There's a customer," she said, turning away to the kitchen.

And for the first time Deborah noticed the coffee cup on the table of the corner booth.

"I know my Deborah doesn't mean to be rude," Mrs. Mayview said from the kitchen, pouring out two more ginger beers and one quick splash of gin. "She really does think the world of you, Mr. Pomerance."

The voice of Mr. Pomerance rolled in from the porch, heavy with reproach. "But working on a Sunday!"

Mrs. Mayview shouted out through the door.

"It's because she's got it in her head that we're poor, you see.

Works herself to the limit to bring extra money back to the house. Make a wonderful wife for someone that watches their D's and C's."

"What's that?"

"Dollars and cents."

She could see him through the wire mesh, shaking his florid face.

"Money isn't everything."

No. Not when you've got it laid by in bales, Mrs. Mayview thought. It's like good health—you don't miss it till it's gone. She went back out onto the porch with two sweating glasses.

The shadows in the yard were lengthening now. The sun was creeping down into the northwest, changing its angle of attack as though it were determined to seek out and roast any shaded recess it had missed. But the porch, facing away from it, kept its shade. They sat in their chairs and looked out at the old barn, its back cleanly broken as if by a blow from some giant hand, watching it bake in the sun-yellowed dust of the yard, with, all around, in every direction, the sunflowers crowding the flat fields and worshipping the sun.

Mrs. Mayview studied Mr. Pomerance out of the corner of one eye; he sat in his chair like a man on fire, breathing; there were long red hairs across the backs of his hands, coiled up tight as though he had been singed before escaping into the shade.

"That strawberry patch of yours coming on at all?" he said with sudden interest.

"Not at all," Mrs. Mayview answered quickly.

"Looks to be freshly dug up there along the back, against my sunflowers."

"To loosen up the earth," Mrs. Mayview explained, "for next year's crop." She changed the subject with an intimate softness, "As I was saying, my Debbie thinks the world of you, Mr. Pomerance."

"Earth seems mounded up a bit. You been bringing in fill, too?"

"She talks about you all the time."

"Almost like something's buried there . . ."

"Course, I *know* she's young . . ."

"Something shoving up from below, wanting out . . ."

"But she's quite the grownup woman now, you *must* have noticed that, Mr. Pomerance."

That got him. Mr. Pomerance slowly turned and looked at her. It was a look that gave Mrs. Mayview gooseflesh all over, a look

she hadn't thought him capable of. Red hairs nestled in his nose like little hot wires and trembled as he breathed. His boil glowed like an ember over his eye.

"Please," he said in a very tiny voice.

But Mrs. Mayview was determined.

"Quite the woman, Mr. Pomerance. And she will insist on wearing that tight clothing. Goes about the house in her underwear half the time, too. 'Course, if she was married and living with her husband, I don't suppose he would complain too much about *that*."

"Please," said Mr. Pomerance, struggling. "Please."

Mrs. Mayview looked at his glass.

"Your ice is all melted," she said. "This heat!"

Mrs. Mayview served cold cuts; it was the sensible thing, considering.

"And potato salad, since I know you like it, Mr. Pomerance, though I can't swear to the salad dressing in this heat. But I put in lots of those little onions you prefer." And glancing at her watch, "Where is that Debbie of ours?"

In the end they decided to eat without her. The shadow of the house was long enough now to provide shade for Mrs. Mayview to serve up on the picnic table. Without a presentable tablecloth, she spread old newspapers over the heat-warped wood and the bird stains; and as an afterthought she arranged a sheet or two to give Mr. Pomerance a clear view of the movie page and its suggestive advertisements. *Got to fan an ember*. Then she called him down from the porch.

"If our Debbie has to eat in that awful Crocus instead of here with us in the open air, just to raise a few dollars, then I don't know." Mrs. Mayview waved at the spiraling flies without effect.

"It will be her loss," said Mr. Pomerance, seating himself on the creaking boards with dignity. "A feast for a king is what you've set out here today."

"Oh, now, Mr. Pomerance, you're too kind. Besides, I can't cook at next to our Debbie. She can outcook me any day at all."

"Not possible." Mr. Pomerance scooped half the bowl of potato salad onto his plate, then laced it heavily with horseradish. "A woman of your experience, after all, Mrs. Mayview." He shoveled himself some hot pickles and some corned beef and carved off a thick slab of bread. "A woman of your experience, who's been married."

Mrs. Mayview, struggling with the flies for possession of her plate, hesitated for one brief moment, then smiled politely, confused. "Married, Mr. Pomerance?"

He nodded with his mouth full, jaws laboring hard. His nose hairs bristled. "What I mean by that," he added hastily, "is that you would know, besides cooking . . . certain ways of the world, which a younger girl . . ." He was wandering dangerously near the edge and he knew it. He set down his fork and drew his short strong hands down his fiery face. "Things, I mean, which a younger girl wouldn't—I mean *shouldn't*—know."

He stared back at her with a pitiful smile. And then he winked. And then he picked up his fork.

Mrs. Mayview was having trouble believing what she had just seen, what she had just heard. Surely this wasn't *her* Mr. Pomerance here at the table. Not the Mr. Pomerance of hellfire and brimstone. She wasn't at all certain how she ought to react.

Then she had it.

He was testing her.

The thing to do was to take a firm, though not a hostile, line.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Mr. Pomerance," she said with severity. "We were talking about our Debbie. And you might be surprised what young girls know nowadays."

Then, to show that her mind was clear of the incident, Mrs. Mayview said, "Isn't that old barn a sight? You know, if I had the money, I'd tear it down and put in a swimming pool in its place, though there's lots of old memories it recalls. I remember when Debbie was small and playing at hide and seek with her cousins before they moved away, she'd run straight for that barn, then nip right by it quick and go hide out back of it in the chicken house. Fool them every time."

Mr. Pomerance grinned and went on eating. Mrs. Mayview felt as if something very nasty was sidling round her. Never before had Mr. Pomerance said anything so—*suggestive*—before. And now that he had, she found she didn't like it. Not one bit. She watched him eat and noticed for the first time that his teeth were bent and brown. She let herself wonder for a moment whether Debbie saw him in this way, then shook the idea off.

Mr. Pomerance is a good catch. Mr. Pomerance is rich. And we can all get bad teeth soon enough, she told herself.

It was going on sundown when Debbie got home. She rolled up against a flame-red sky to the foot of the lane in Mr. Dodson's

truck, a Jeep-like thing with fat black tires and a stripe along its side. Mr. Dodson unloaded her bicycle, waved to Mrs. Mayview, then turned and sped away to his own supper. Deborah walked her bike up the lane towards the house, laughing.

And with her walked a long-legged dark young man.

"Who," said Mr. Pomerance, "is that?"

Mrs. Mayview watched them come, shook her head, and hissed to herself. Another one, she thought, I don't believe it. That girl brings them home faster than a landlady with a mortgage. Next it'll be twins; I'll have to plant them double-deckered; I'll have to hire some help.

Aloud she said, "That'll be just some fool boy up from the restaurant. Mooching around for a free meal, I'll bet—couldn't manage their prices, cheap as they are."

Mr. Pomerance harrumphed.

"Then you don't know boys. I'd say he's come up for more than a slice of bread." Mr. Pomerance lowered his brow until his boil sat right over his nose. The boy had draped his arm around Debbie's shoulders.

Mrs. Mayview suddenly felt very old. She spoke without conviction. "Nothing for you to worry about. Nothing I can't handle. No concern of yours, Mr. Pomerance."

Mr. Pomerance reached out and patted her hand in a way she didn't like. "I'm not concerned. Except for the fact it's a Sunday."

The two young people had reached the yard and were striding in now, raising a dust. Debbie's eyes sparkled with hope and pleasure.

"Mr. Pomerance, Ma, I want you to meet my friend Derek."

The boy showed them a mouthful of teeth and nodded so that his thick curls shook. His forehead and cheeks were burnt pink from hitchhiking.

"Hot one," he said.

Careful, now, Mrs. Mayview told herself. Don't show the cat to the mouse. Be your friendly old self no matter how hard it is.

"I suppose," she complained, "you'll want something to eat. Well, go ahead, help yourselves to whatever's left. Leave the potato salad, though, for Mr. Pomerance to take home with him."

"We're not hungry, Ma."

"Not hungry?"

"No. We ate up at the Crocus. Derek bought me a steak."

"A steak?"

Mrs. Mayview swallowed and ran her tongue around her mouth.

It had been over a year since she had last enjoyed a steak, and that had been cooked at home.

"I'm just going to show Derek around the place. He thinks he might stay the night. Maybe a few days after, too. He's on his way to the coast."

"Got an uncle there," the boy added, as if that explained everything, and Debbie led him away into the house.

"Bold as taxes!" Mrs. Mayview sniffed. "They get worse every day, don't they?"

"Pardon?"

She turned to Mr. Pomerance.

He was staring at her, one elbow on the table, one hairy fist buried in his cheek. He was not acting himself at all.

"You okay, Mr. Pomerance?"

"Oh, *fine*, fine. Just fine."

"I said that boy was brassy."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure you're right." His eyes were glazed, and he kept them fixed on her. She wondered if he'd been in the fields without his hat that day—a touch of the sunstroke, maybe. She'd have offered him another ginger beer if he hadn't still had half a glass of it in front of him. Maybe what he needed was a walk, a little activity to stir himself, get his machinery going again.

Mrs. Mayview suggested a walk.

And she started in about Debbie again.

"They say that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, Mr. Pomerance. You've read that in your Bible, haven't you?" He shook his head. "Well, believe me, Debbie will be in an awful fury if you don't hurry up and show some interest in her. I know you feel for her in your heart, but she can't read a man's heart the way a woman of my age can."

"Women your age have many attributes, Mrs. Mayview."

She was sorry she had mentioned it.

They had walked right around the barn, around the front of the house, up the side of the lot and, almost before she realized it, Mrs. Mayview found herself standing with Mr. Pomerance at the foot of the strawberry patch.

Mr. Pomerance narrowed his eyes and said, "Yes, it certainly looks as if somebody's been hauling fill in here."

"Nobody has," replied Mrs. Mayview. "I told you, I was loosening up the soil. I never hauled any fill in here."

"No. 'Course not. No reason for it. This isn't low ground. It

wouldn't flood here. And besides, with this drought..."

"And disturbed earth always stands a little higher," she heard herself say. And beside her Mr. Pomerance clucked his thick wet tongue.

They could hear Deborah and her new young man wandering and speaking in the furnace of the house and its oven rooms. They'll be out soon enough, Mrs. Mayview thought, the heat'll drive them to it.

Laughter pealed out of a high-flung window, Debbie's voice, and jarred the purple-shadowed silence of the garden. From where she stood with Mr. Pomerance in the strawberry patch, the house was in silhouette, one with the flat dark land, a projection of it, hard, angular, and cookstove black. Behind it the orange-red hundred-mile horizon ran away. The crickets in the sunflowers were beginning to scrape.

Mrs. Mayview burned with an ache of sullen, sad resentment. This was not the way the evening was supposed to have gone. Debbie was to have been laughing, all right, but on the porch, and with Mr. Pomerance, flirting. Mrs. Mayview would then have withdrawn gladly and discreetly to her hot, close room and her griddle bed, happily breathing up the suffocation and the shadows and listening through her open window to the proceedings on the porch below. It was one way of bringing the two of them together, the way Mrs. Mayview preferred. But if Mr. Pomerance dragged his feet, Mrs. Mayview was ready for that, too. She would land him anyway: if not gently with the net of Debbie's charms, then quickly and viciously with the sharp, sudden hook of accusation.

But it seemed now that all of this was not to be. Not this night, at least. Damn Crocus boys. Always shoving their noses in like puppies at a picnic.

She heard herself explaining, "You see, I thought if I broke up all this baked brick earth it might suck up some of the next rains, if rain ever *does* fall on us again, and then next year I could forget all about the strawberries and try something else, like maybe those little cherry tomatoes, or some cukes for pickling, or—"

Her voice suddenly failed her.

She wanted to carry on speaking, moved her jaw once, twice, but a sudden cold-water shock had stabbed and stricken her with a paralysis of the will.

Mr. Pomerance had just put his arm around her waist.

Two opposing and raging desires seized Mrs. Mayview that moment and tossed her up against herself: the desire to placate the

necessary Mr. Pomerance, to ally herself through Debbie with his wallet and his influence; and the galloping-panic need to tear his creeping hand from her body, to fling Mr. Pomerance himself away in a hairy heap among his waiting watchful sunflowers.

I loathe the man, she thought, with a touch of surprise.

She edged herself away. Gently.

"Mr. Pomerance . . ."

"Please, Mrs. Mayview . . ."

"Mr. Pomerance!"

"Please, please . . ." His breath whined in his throat like a thousand tiny gales.

"Remember yourself, Mr. Pomerance. It isn't fair to—to Debbie. You'll break her heart, don't you see?"

His hand floated after her out of the dark, plump and damp. His voice was husky and urgent. "But Mrs. Mayview, it isn't Debbie—it's you!"

"No, Mr. Pomerance, no!"

Mrs. Mayview heaved away, lurching heavily over the loose, clodded earth. One ankle went wrong in her haste and an arrow of pain stabbed up her calf. Mr. Pomerance pursued her, a looming bulk in the darkness. His fingers plucked at her elbow, hot, moist, clutching. She heard his plea wheezing out through his full red lips, "Please!"

Mrs. Mayview thrust him aside with both hands and ran.

She blundered twice around the strawberry patch, him in pursuit like an amorous bull, then in desperation stumped straight out into the endless twilight sunflowers, Mr. Pomerance plodding solidly after her.

No! thought Mrs. Mayview, as she brunted down the heavy-headed plants. No! Her ankle pulsed with pain. I don't want you, Mr. Pomerance. Your money, your prestige, your easy future, yes—but not you. Oh, not you! I wouldn't have the strength for you every hot strangling night, every roasting murderous day. I'm too old and tired to be always watching behind me. Oh, why can't you like my Debbie? She's young, strong, she can look out for herself. But not me, Mr. Pomerance. Not me!

Mrs. Mayview wasn't a thoroughbred, and she knew it. But neither was Mr. Pomerance, though he was just a step behind her. Perhaps she might have outrun him if her foot hadn't snagged on one unforgiving stalk to bring her down.

They collapsed upon each other, two heavy bodies in a heap, sunflowers crackling and popping under them, the smell of pungent

broken stalks. Mr. Pomerance, gaining his knees, managed to get his arms around her. She fended him off, pulled away. And then Mrs. Mayview found a rage within herself and slapped him full across the face, hard. He pitched back on his heels with a sharp cry like a struck dog.

He looked so completely staggered and so suddenly vulnerable that she slapped him again. A good one.

"There!" snapped Mrs. Mayview. "Now you stop!"

In the thin dusty light he faced her, mouth open, eyes rolling stupidly.

"I'm not marrying you, Mr. Pomerance. Not you, not anybody. Get that through your thick sunflower head. You're going to marry Debbie, understand? I worked hard for it, sweated for it. My mind's set on it. What the devil's wrong with you, anyway, chasing after an old woman, and Debbie so young and pretty? You ought to be thanking me for helping you with her instead of galloping me through ten million sunflower seeds in the middle of the night. Any man in your place would be tickled through with my idea. Or ought to be. You don't know what I've gone through for you, Mr. Pomerance."

Mr. Pomerance could only blink; his breath boiled like asthma; he sat like a great red fungus in the dark. Mrs. Mayview felt a sudden need to convince.

All right, she thought, if the carrot won't do it, you silly old man, mind your behind because here comes the stick.

Mr. Pomerance was gaping.

"And don't you look at me like that, either, you . . . you puffed-up choir boy. You and your holier-than-thou." She leaned her face into him. "Listen. I know what happened out back in your sunflowers two years ago one baking dog-day night. A night just like this one, caught between two molten days like a shadow between two furnaces."

He watched her. His eyebrow lifted his boil up.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Scriptures-and-ginger-beer, I saw *you*, that's what I saw. I saw you real close. I had come up the back way to bring you the rent. And there you were, sunflowers tickling your armpits, digging, digging, digging, out in your own back garden, tossing earth like a dog with a bone. Only it wasn't any bone you were burying, Mr. Praise-the-Lord." She forced a wicked grin. "Though I suppose Mrs. Pomerance might be bones by now, mightn't she?"

Mr. Pomerance's boil had crept almost up to his hairline.

Mrs. Mayview smiled. "And you liked to think you were an in-

spiration to us all, didn't you?" Her smile became a sneer. "But you, Mr. Pomerance, are an inspiration to nobody. *Nobody!*"

There was no breeze at all. They sat under the stars, on the seething volcanic prairie, among the sunflower plants, and listened to the ten million insects that pounced and warred and scuttled and died around them.

"Your secret's safe with me, Mr. Pomerance. I haven't told a single soul in all this time. Instead I've been slowly working it out, watching Debbie grow up into such a beauty—working it out how you and me could come to some sort of arrangement—you without a wife, and me without money. So get your mind off a fat old lady, and think about a pretty young girl, will you? Will you do that?"

Mr. Pomerance sat in the night.

Mrs. Mayview crawled out of the sunflowers into the strawberry patch. Still on her knees, she rummaged at one corner in her hiding place among the stalks, and drew out the spade and the old blunted axe.

"You're going to do a job for me, Mr. Pomerance. For both of us, actually. It's something I could never do—too squeamish. It's man's work and you've got the required experience, after all. Dig us a hole—you know the size. Here's the tools. You got to break the ground first with the axe before you can get the spade into it. Come out of there and get started."

She got stiffly to her feet and showed him where to dig by hefting the axe into the ground.

"Now I'm going back up to that house and lever those two apart, and put Debbie away someplace safe, and put the run to that worthless young bum, and send him down here into your waiting arms. You ought to have a nice deep hole waiting by then. So that's that, and that's flat! Got it?"

When she looked back over the midnight sunflower sea she saw that the stars had lit up Mr. Pomerance's face like a small round balloon that hovered bodiless above the bowing plants.

The pain in Mrs. Mayview's ankle was wicked. She limped out of the strawberry patch with its sleeping secrets, *her* secrets, and on up the path. She crossed the silent simmering yard and sat herself down at the picnic table to find her breath. A few yards away the house reared up out of the shadowed dust, door wide as a mouth, lights in every window, like a gargantuan Halloween face.

She dug her broken nails into the rotting boards of the table.

Debbie's ghetto blaster throbbed a faint repetitious beat.

"Debbie," she said in a whisper, "where are you, girl? Come out here and tell me you'll marry that old fool. It needn't be for long. We'll work something out. There's ways—if his heart *does* survive the honeymoon. Lots of ways. Like too many thick, feathered pillows on the bed. A spot of grease on the stairs. I got ideas, Debbie, you'll see. I'd marry him myself, except—" She shuddered, thinking of Mr. Pomerance's heavy breathing face above the sunflowers.

"Come on out here, Debbie, I'll explain it to you . . ."

She didn't know how long she sat there.

Then she thought she heard a muted voice, not from the lit-up house but from the old hunched dead-black barn. Where are you, Deb? Mrs. Mayview whispered in her mind.

"Where are you, Deb?" a voice mocked her.

It was an unfamiliar voice, the voice of the boy. Emanating from someplace back of the barn. They were playing hide and seek. That was it.

"Come on, Deb, we don't have all night. Let's go."

"No," hissed Mrs. Mayview under her breath, "Debbie, you stay put."

She got heavily to her feet.

She trod almost silently over the hard-baked earth. She was barefooted, she suddenly realized; her shoes must be lost somewhere out there among the sunflowers. But the soles of her feet were tough; she went barefoot often. And she glided, glided, deeper into the night at the back of the yard, stopped at the old chicken house, reached out and eased the wooden latch into place.

Yes, Debbie, I know all your hiding places. Now you stay right where you are, just like Ma says.

Next, the boy.

She approached the abrupt grey side of the barn, met it, and put her hand on the flaking boards to feel her way. She stopped before the gaping black doorway. He would be inside, looking for Debbie, poking around in the old stalls by the light that filtered in from the split-open roof. All she had to do now was to call him out.

She realized she had forgotten his name.

"Boy," she called finally. "Boy. It's me—Debbie's ma. I want to talk to you. Come out."

Nothing. Perhaps he was in the house. She would look.

But the house was all empty rooms and firebox heat and lights blazing away like the last reward. She looked into Debbie's room,

found it empty, and turned away. But . . . there had been something. She looked back in. The long draped cloth that served as a closet door was pulled back.

And all Debbie's clothes were gone.

Mrs. Mayview wheeled about, stumped groaning down the stairs, and limped breathing into the night.

"Boy!" she shouted. "Oh no, you don't. You come back here this minute, boy! Debbie!"

She searched the yard, raising up a dust, hooted through the old barn, even unlatched the chicken house door and felt inside. Nothing. She went and stood at the edge of the sunflower field with her hands pressed together like a girl in a choir.

"Boy, where are you? Where are you, boy? You out there in those sunflowers? Come on out. Or must I come in there and get you?"

She moved ahead a step.

"You stop right there!" snapped a voice.

Mr. Pomerance shambled forward out of the night-sleeping stalks, hands held high, and what Mrs. Mayview noticed first in the feeble light was that the sweat stains under his arms now dropped in dark half-moon shadows almost to the belt of his trousers. And only then did she look up and see the high-flung rusted axe that he gripped.

Mrs. Mayview stopped. Mr. Pomerance stopped. Neither one of them moved.

They faced each other for two long seconds, three; then slowly Mr. Pomerance let down the heavy blade until the haft met his collar and his shoulder took up the weight.

"Where is the boy?" Mrs. Mayview asked in a rough whisper.

"Gone," replied Mr. Pomerance. "And Deborah, too. I gave them five hundred dollars and told them to get up to the highway and wave down the midnight bus. Told them to keep on rolling till it was stop or drop right into the ocean."

Mrs. Mayview narrowed her eyes.

"No. You're lying. Debbie wouldn't leave like that and not say a word to me."

Mr. Pomerance shrugged, and the axehead rose and fell in the air. "She did all the same. I told her you'd stop her from going, that you were too proud to let her take the bus fare money from me. They'll make the bus, all right. There's plenty of time."

Mrs. Mayview edged away. "Debbie can't leave me. I'll stop her." The axe leaped up a foot.

"No," said Mr. Pomerance with grim strength. His little eyes

shone in his face. "Let the young go off by themselves. It's the natural way. It's best."

"You can't stop me from getting my Debbie back," said Mrs. Mayview with defiance. "You can't hold that axe over me forever. There's times you'll have to sleep, times you'll have to go out back. And I can ride a bus, too, you know." And then in a flash of realization she extended one finger at Mr. Pomerance's face. "And you seem to be forgetting—I've got a hold over you!"

Now Mr. Pomerance smiled.

"So you think you're the only one that's got a hold on people, do you? Think I don't know why all that ground is heaved up back there in the strawberry patch? Think you're the only one can creep through fields and spy on people in the dark? Well, I've done some creeping, too. I've worked a few things out myself. It's you I want. Not your daughter. I've wanted you for a long, long time, but you would keep pushing your daughter at me so I couldn't get properly round to the subject. You and me—we're a pair. It's all I've thought about for ages, with the sun pounding and pounding down on me, driving me right down into the dust."

He was panting with excitement.

"You said I was not an inspiration to anybody. But that isn't so. I was an inspiration to you, wasn't I?"

With a wild laugh Mr. Pomerance sent the axe spinning end over end to bury itself in one of the mounds at the back of the strawberry patch.

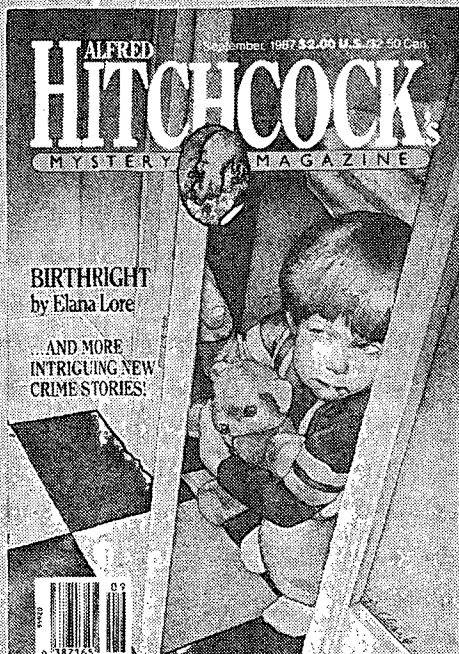
He's as mad as a hatter, Mrs. Mayview thought with a shudder.

She saw Debbie in her mind's eye rolling away in an air-conditioned bus, speeding free of the prairie, the heat, the Crocus, her face towards the sea and her back to her home and her own ma. There was a tragedy to it that reached her, reached down into the deep dryness of her heart and wrung emotion from it. Debbie, her Debbie, hurtling away and away, a whine of tires on the road, a pair of taillights dwindling into the night.

Mrs. Mayview felt the rain beginning to come, the droplets of it welling up heavy in her eyes.

Mr. Pomerance's hand was strong; it was moist from the heat; it was like damp wood. It locked Mrs. Mayview's own hand in its grip and the power of it was terrifying. All she could think of now was her last glimpse of the previous Mrs. Pomerance being slung like a sack over a hole in the night.

"I don't think," Mr. Pomerance said, "that you ought to wear white to the ceremony—do you?"



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UNSOLVED

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you figure it out?

The answer will appear in the December issue.

An elderly queen, her daughter, and little son, weighing 195 pounds, 105 pounds, and 90 pounds respectively, were kept prisoners at the top of a high tower. The only communication with the ground below was a cord passing over a pulley, with a basket at each end, and so arranged that when one basket rested on the ground the other was opposite the window. Naturally, if the one were more heavily loaded than the other, the heavier would descend; but if the excess on either side was more than 15 pounds, the descent became so rapid as to be dangerous, and from the position of the rope the captives could not check it with their hands. The only thing available to help them in the tower was a cannonball, weighing 75 pounds. They, notwithstanding, contrived to escape.

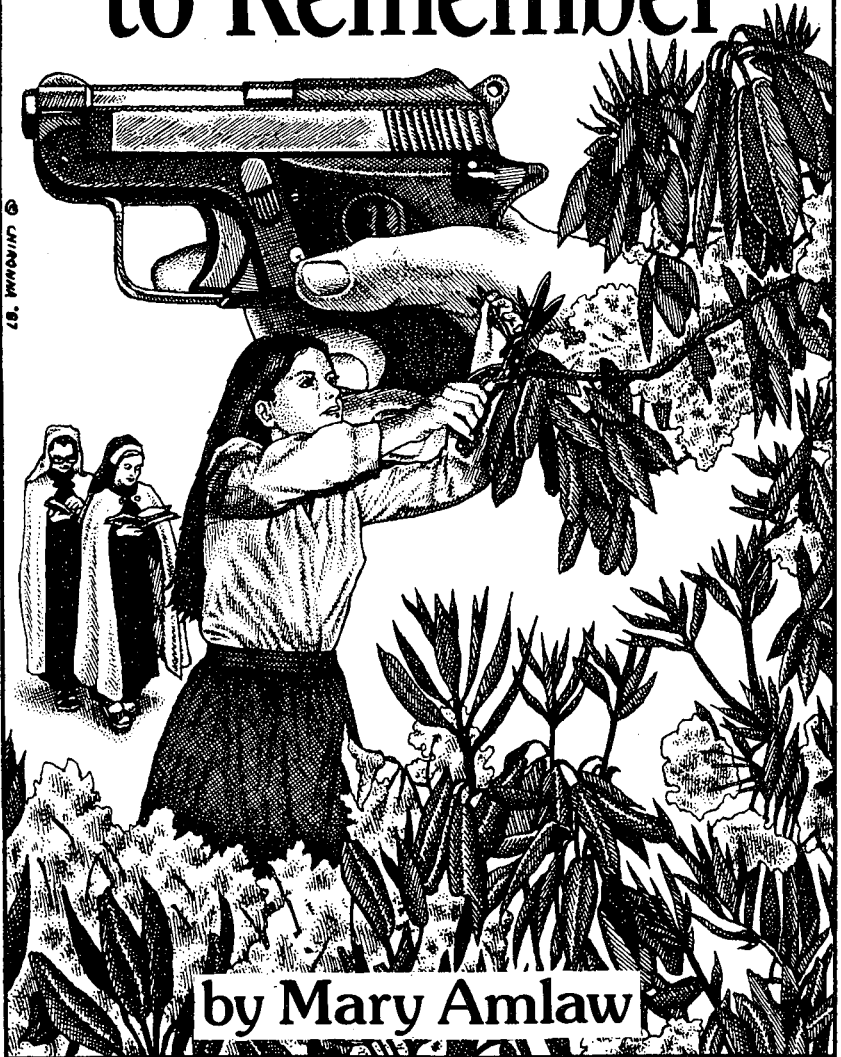
How did they manage it?

See page 133 for the solution to the October puzzle.

"The Captives in the Tower," taken from Merlin's Puzzle Pastimes edited by Charles Barry Townsend. Copyright © 1986 by Charles Barry Townsend. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY.

FICTION

A Face to Remember



by Mary Amlaw

Illustration by Ron Chironna

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“**M**ay I speak with you, Mother?”

Small and stooped with age, Sister Gabriela paused respectfully by the prioress' desk. Normally she wore a smile that radiated joy, but she was not smiling today. On the contrary, she seemed unusually agitated. An ordinary person might not have detected Gabriela's emotion, for the Daughters of Elias had learned in pre-Vatican II days to conceal anything that seemed negative, but Mary Dominic noticed the line that kept reappearing between Gabriela's eyebrows and the small sigh that escaped her unsmiling lips.

With a small gesture Mary Dominic invited Gabriela to sit down. Mary Dominic was the elected superior of the community, charged not only with the care of souls but with the overall well-being of the nuns. Keeping eighteen women in harmony—Mary Dominic already thought of little Sharon Diaz as one of themselves—taxed her innate understanding of people far more than handling the needs of scores of retreatants. They returned to the outside world within a few days. The community remained.

Mary Dominic smiled at Gabriela. “Yes, sister?” Gabriela was ninety-two, a meek soul

tending towards scruples. A gifted artist, her eyes were still sharp and her hands still able to wield the brush, although more slowly than before.

Gabriela whispered, “Mother, I've sinned against charity. Oh, such a stupid offense! I hardly know how to tell you.”

Mary Dominic had never known a scruple in her life. A vibrant woman, she embraced life whole-heartedly, and had a knack for restoring minor difficulties to their proper perspective. But she had a soft spot for Gabriela, so timid and loving, and nodded to encourage her to speak.

“I was assigned to one of our retreatants, Mrs. Prestavolta. Mother, I've been praying earnestly for guidance on how best to help her. Her face struck me the moment I saw her, when she registered. There is no peace in it. I went to her room this morning to inquire about when she would like to make an appointment for spiritual discussion. Her door was partly open, and music was coming out.”

Gabriela unconsciously wrinkled her forehead in dismay. “Not religious music, Mother. That loud noise the youngsters seem to enjoy. She didn't hear my knock, but it made the door swing open wider. Poor Mrs. Prestavolta—poor thing!” Gabriela's eyes filled with tears of

compassion. "She was *shaving*, Mother. I had a relative once with the same problem, and it made her life a misery. I understood then why Mrs. Prestavolta has been so withdrawn. She doesn't want her secret known, poor woman."

Mary Dominic was more amused than she wanted Gabriela to know. "Did she see you, sister?"

"Oh, no, Mother. I drew the door nearly shut, as it had been, and left without speaking to her. But I clumsily intruded on that woman's privacy, Mother, and now I know her secret which I have no right to know."

Mary Dominic managed to sound as solemn as the situation warranted. "Dear sister, please do not upset yourself so. Our dear Lord would not desire it. Who knows, perhaps He allowed you to learn this secret for some purpose of His own. I know you won't say anything of her affliction. That would be truly uncharitable."

"But there's more fault on my part," Gabriela said. "I had meant to instruct her about our regard for silence. I understood too late that she had the radio playing so loudly to cover the noise of the razor. If I hadn't been so quick to judge—"

"Life is full of ifs," Mary Dominic soothed her. "Put it behind you, sister. You meant no harm, and where there is no

ill intent, there is no sin."

Gabriela left Mary Dominic's presence only partially consoled. Tact suggested she avoid Mrs. Prestavolta unless the woman approached her; conscience urged that she keep a watchful eye on Mrs. Prestavolta from a distance in an effort to anticipate any of the poor woman's desires. Mrs. Prestavolta had little to say to her fellow retreatants. She had not requested spiritual guidance and didn't seem drawn to the chapel, but she did spend many hours on the grounds by herself. Gabriela considered that Mrs. Prestavolta was communing with God among the trees, alone and in silence. That was what a retreat was for—solitude and silence with God. Mrs. Prestavolta was surely in need of God. Her features haunted Gabriela. So shallow a face! No peace, no joy, no love resided there.

Perhaps God had allowed Gabriela to blunder because He wanted to reach the woman in His own way. He would touch her, and then she would wish to speak to Gabriela. Until then, Gabriela would remain at a distance, watching and praying.

Sharon Carmelita Diaz sat at the small desk in her narrow cell. The community had informed her after morning prayer

that she had been accepted. She had been with the Daughters of Elias twelve months; first as a retreatant, then as postulant and novice. Now she was to choose her profession day, when she would dress like a bride to make her solemn vows. Then she would retire and be dressed in the dark blue habit of the sisters. Thereafter she would be called by her name in religion, Sister Mary Magdalen—a name she had chosen as being eminently suitable.

She had won. Twelve months of prayer, of obedience, of uninspired meals. Twelve months laboring without pay, without crossing the iron gates of the convent into the outside world. Twelve months of behaving like the most docile applicant ever to approach a community.

At first she barely survived from hour to hour. Only the thought of Big Luke's vengeance had helped her persist. He thought she had agreed to testify against him when he was picked up for the murder of a local politician who had been making trouble for Luke and his colleagues.

She would never doublecross a man like Luke, but he had been looking for a scapegoat and he would never believe her. He picked her up six months before when she was working Las Vegas as a stripper, and he was already tired of her.

Sharon never knew her mother. Her grandmother died when she was five, and her father, a migrant farm worker, had no way to raise her. By the time she was fourteen she'd lived in seven foster homes and two residences. Her body was her fortune. She took to the streets, then to the lounges. She'd been doing just fine when Luke picked her up. If he hadn't been arrested, the affair would have fizzled out without any danger. As it was, she thought flight her best chance to live, even though she knew it sealed her guilt in Luke's eyes.

She went to the Daughters of Elias, a continent away in Boston, Massachusetts, as an ordinary retreatant. The scores of weary people seeking the peace and solace of God made her feel safe. Three days after arriving, she lied, saying that she felt an attraction to the religious life; would the Daughters of Elias accept her as a postulant?

The nuns seemed like children to her. They accepted her lies as truth, and she assumed the outward shell of their life as a protective disguise.

A year had gone. Luke must have forgotten her by now, or given up the search. She knew she could leave for the city at last. She had five hundred dollars and jewelry the nuns didn't know about. That was nothing given the way she spent in the

old days, but it would get her a room for a few days while she found an income. With her dark eyes, creamy skin, and sexy figure that wouldn't be hard. Twelve months of convent life hadn't killed her skill with men, she was sure.

Time to resume the excitement of her old life. The habit of prayer would soon be overcome by pleasure, the remembrance of solitude and silence swamped by headier joys.

She had played her part perfectly for twelve long months, amused and then intrigued by the existence of such an unworldly thing as a community of women who took God so seriously they had vowed to devote their lives to Him.

Maybe she had played her part too perfectly. The lie had become truth: she was attracted to this life. But in spite of the morning's good news, she was most certainly not acceptable; the nuns thought her an orphan who had been a good little mouse from birth. Would they want her if they knew she had been a hooker, a stripper, a criminal's girl?

There was only one way to find out. Sharon pulled a piece of stationery towards her and began to write. "Dear Mother Mary Dominic, I have not been honest with you and the community."

She wrote quickly, without pausing to phrase her words more tactfully, sealed the letter without rereading it, and took it at once to Mary Dominic's cell. Then she went to her work in the garden.

Once Mary Dominic read that letter, Sharon feared she would be asked to leave. She did not want to leave. And others had applied who were not very good material on the face of it; at least one boasted a past nearly as colorful as Sharon's. The nuns made her welcome, to Sharon's surprise. "Some of God's greatest saints began as notorious sinners," Mary Dominic told her. "If God calls souls here, we must give them their chance." But the life proved too foreign and she left within weeks.

The white rhododendron needed attention. Sharon concentrated on debriding the leaves of last year's dead stalks. She made a perfect target as she stretched to reach the top of the bush.

White rhododendrons, Ouzo noted. Expensive. The Daughters of Elias must have money somewhere.

He looked around carefully. The retreatants were attending the late morning conference, the nuns were at their house-

hold tasks, the garden below was empty except for Sharon. A wall surrounded the grounds, and trees grew near the wall, protecting him from the street. He was on the fire escape outside the women's wing, just beyond the lilac hedge that separated the retreatants' garden from the small area reserved for the nuns.

He aimed without hurry. The bullet had only to graze her. It had been treated with a nicotine solution that would poison her after he had gone. The bullet reached its mark; she slapped at her neck and looked about as if a bee had stung her. Good. Maybe she'd realize Big Luke had caught up with her before she died. He watched her resume breaking the spikes of the dead flowerets as if nothing had happened and smiled, a lengthening of the upper lip and a glint in the eyes that boded no good. Soon the poison would work; she might feel faint and excuse herself from recreation, or keel over unexpectedly in choir. She might think it was flu. The nuns might never know otherwise; and if they came to realize it was murder, they would surely want to hush it up. From what he had learned, that Mary Dominic had the clout to do it.

It had gone well. Luke would be pleased.

Ouzo slid the gun into the purse at his feet. Now he would leave by the front gate in the same guise in which he had entered—a retreatant. At the corner he would walk boldly into St. Anthony's church. Only the side door nearest the rectory was left open nowadays—symbolic of the neighborhood's deteriorating respectability—but he could leave by any door; it would lock behind him. An old lady or two might be huddled in one of the pews, saying her beads. He would walk by, lock himself in the restroom near the sacristy, shed wig and dress, and emerge as a male. His disguise would join the bundles of clothes collected monthly for the poor.

Purse in hand, he turned to find two dark eyes peering at him from the wall. A black kid, about eight or nine. The child gave a startled gasp and leaped for the ground. Ouzo heard him pounding down the sidewalk.

How much had the kid seen? Was he there when Ouzo fired? No. He had checked. At most, the kid had seen an aging woman fumbling with her purse. Even if he had glimpsed the gun, what harm would it do? This was a neighborhood where people kept shootings and brawls and drugdealing to themselves. If Ouzo had thought there was any danger, he would

have hunted the kid down and killed him. It wasn't mercy that spared the boy's life, but cocksureness. Ouzo never made mistakes.

He checked to make sure nothing had been left in his room, hefted his overnight bag, and walked down the stairs to the front lobby in the slightly dragging gait of a weary, arthritic woman. He even gave a nod to the elderly nun who appeared from nowhere to open the door for him.

Beyond the iron gates of the convent, the street was clear. At night it would be a different story: every stoop and porch crowded with people escaping the heat inside. Radios blaring, teens necking in the shadows and flaunting themselves on the street.

By then Ouzo would be far away. Even if the murder got out and some smart cop tied it up to Luke's trial, there was no way to connect it with Ouzo. He smiled as he made his way into the dim coolness of St. Anthony's. He was pleased with himself.

Zebulon Williams leaned on the buzzer that would eventually bring a nun to the door. When the neighborhood had been middle-class Irish and Italian, the door had opened at the slightest touch

and the caller could wait in a vestibule furnished with comfortable chairs. Now the vestibule was bare, and the doors that led from it were kept locked.

Zeb danced with impatience. He had just run from his third-floor apartment down the street, where he had watched the gun-toting old lady head downhill to St. Anthony's. He had waited until she was gone before coming to tell Mother Mary Dominic his story. She'd know what to do. She always did.

The door was opened by Sister Vincent. Zeb didn't like her. Sister Vincent had joined the Daughters of Elias in the palmy days when a single family owned an entire house now converted to six apartments and all the neighbors were white. Nuns were considered a spiritual luxury then, a jewel in the crown of the parish, for the Daughters of Elias were not teaching nuns. They were spiritual directors. The convent was a house of prayer for all who felt the need.

In those days, people who requested spiritual favors came laden with welcome gifts. Delicacies the nuns never purchased for themselves appeared to brighten feast days. Fine linens, warm sweaters, expensive chocolates, imported liqueurs—all were accepted gratefully, for when God moved hearts to generosity, it would be churlish

not to accept with joy.

But as urban blight took over, the fine old houses with their molded ceilings and paneled rooms housed the refuse of the city. The fall from middle to lower class to racially-mixed impoverished happened in a decade. Now the only white faces to be seen were within the convent walls.

Seldom now was the plain convent fare broken with delicacies. The neighbors rarely asked for prayers. They wanted help with landlords who shut off the heat, with children dealing drugs, with intemperate or disappearing spouses.

Sister Vincent found the change most contrary to her idea of the calling of a Daughter of Elias. Mary Dominic, on the other hand, thrived on it. She knew all the neighbors by name. They held her in reverence, not knowing how she managed to get faulty plumbing fixed and exorbitant rents reduced; where she found scholarships for students who would otherwise have to leave school. Some said when Mary Dominic spoke, the very demons of hell jumped to obey.

Zebulon looked up at the imposing height and scowling face of Sister Vincent and grimaced. "I want Sister Mary Dominic, please."

"She is busy," Sister Vincent said loftily. She considered it a

scandal that Mary Dominic allowed everyone such easy access to her office.

"But we are not a cloistered community," Mary Dominic explained patiently to Vincent. "We embody the ideals of the contemplative *and* the active life. Would Our Lord have turned His back on the need of these people? He is our model. Our life has no meaning if it is not patterned on His."

Sister Vincent was silenced but not convinced. In her opinion, a reasonable community would have followed their supporters to the suburbs and not let the inner city surround them; but having made the initial mistake of staying, they might at least hold themselves separate from the riffraff around them.

"It's important," Zeb said urgently.

"I will be the judge of that." Vincent's tone was frosty. "What do you wish to tell her, young man?"

Zebulon considered. He could always scale the convent wall and hide in the garden until Mary Dominic appeared for her evening exercise. Meantime he would leave his message.

"One of the old ladies who was in here has a gun," Zebulon said. "She shot one of the sisters."

"Yes, of course she did," Vin-

cent sniffed. "Run along now. I'll see that your message is delivered."

"Yes'm. Only when Sister Mary Dominic sees me, she gives me a chocolate chip cookie."

"Indeed." Vincent's voice conveyed her disapproval. She closed the door, her sense of righteousness strengthened. One of the retreatants shooting a nun, indeed! What a tale! Obviously the result of too much television. How people as poor as these could afford TV—and color at that—was just one indication of how wrong things were in the world.

In Vincent's day, the poor were decently humble. They didn't spend their meager resources on TV and cigarettes. Altogether, the world was far better in the old days.

Sister Vincent went back to mopping floors. She would convey Zebulón's message as she had promised, but at a suitable time—recreation, when the whole community could enjoy the tale.

Sharon felt too ill for lunch. "I think it's flu," she told Sister Angela, mistress of novices. "If I could lie down—"

"Of course," Angela, a sweet-faced, kind-tempered woman, agreed promptly. "Don't try to

come to choir or evening prayer. I'll look in on you a bit later to see how you are."

Sharon thanked her. She felt very odd. She had always been strong physically. Even the flu rarely laid her low for more than a day or two. Perhaps she was coming down with one of the new strains; her legs and arms felt heavy and her head was swimming. Had Mary Dominic read her letter yet? she wondered. At any rate, the nuns wouldn't be able to put her out sick. She'd have a little longer with them, at least.

Mary Dominic remained in the chapel after Night Prayer, interceding for the well-being of the community. Tonight she was especially concerned about Sharon. Mary Dominic had doubted her fitness for the religious life from the beginning; but as the months passed, Sharon had shown an astonishing progress in prayer and understanding of what it meant to live in community. She had a sweet, complaisant nature that became more evident as the months went on, yet she was stubborn when injustice showed itself. Like Mary Dominic herself, she seemed to have a deeper appreciation of the needs of the neighborhood than some of the nuns who felt

prayer was everything, older nuns with little use for the more recent thrust of the church towards social justice.

The community had voted to accept Sharon, and Mary Dominic had agreed, but she sensed difficulties ahead.

She was interrupted by Sister Angela. "Mother, please come. It's Sharon." Sister Angela was pale.

Mary Dominic rose at once and followed Angela down the long corridor to the novices' wing. It had been built for twenty girls; now there was only Sharon, and three of the older nuns, including Gabriela, who found the stairs to the upper cells difficult.

Sharon seemed to be sleeping peacefully under the single blanket on her straw mattress. On her face was a look of utter peace, as if she were experiencing a splendidly consoling dream. Her hair, not yet cropped, spread thick and dark around her, a rich halo.

"She didn't feel well at lunchtime," Angela said. "I gave her permission to rest in her cell. I looked in on her before going to bed. She doesn't seem to be breathing."

Mary Dominic laid her hand on Sharon's forehead. It was cool.

"I tried to wake her before I came to you," Angela said. Her

eyes met Mary Dominic's. Death was no intruder in their lives but only the final earthly tryst of the soul with God. "Send for Dr. Richards and for Father Lowell," Mary Dominic said. "I can't understand it. Sharon seemed like such a healthy girl."

"Perhaps her heart," Sister Angela suggested. "She seemed overcome when we told her she had been accepted. So much excitement. So much joy."

After doctor and priest fulfilled their offices, the community would gather at the bedside with lighted candles and invoke the angels to lead Sharon's soul to paradise. "Shall I call the others now?" Angela asked.

Some instinct prompted Mary Dominic to say, "Not just yet, sister. We'll wait for the doctor."

Dr. Richards was a distant cousin of Mary Dominic's, a distinguished physician with well-to-do patients. He made himself available to the nuns out of kindness and the strong sense of kinship that had always united the family. When he left Sharon's cell, his face was as gray as his hair.

"I'm afraid this is a police matter," he told his cousin. "There has to be an autopsy." And as Mary Dominic stared at him, uncomprehending, he added gently, "There's a bullet graze beneath the left ear."

"Police?" Only years of searching every event for the will of God kept Mary Dominic's voice under control. She was thinking of the nuns. Vincent would be difficult. Gabriela and some of the older nuns would be frightened into fits. "Are you saying a shot killed her? Sharon was murdered here, in a house of prayer?"

"It may have been an accident," Richards said. "One of the neighborhood kids trying target practice from the wall. Would you prefer to call the police yourself, or would you like me to do it for you?"

"You, please," Mary Dominic said. She wasn't sure she would be coherent if she phoned.

Police calls were common in the neighborhood, but never before at the convent of the Daughters of Elias. Medical examiner, photographer, technicians, investigators—a nightmare. The nuns must be questioned and the retreatants as well, according to Sergeant Mike Maguire.

"I would like to protect the community as much as possible," Mary Dominic said in her most charming manner. "Some of the nuns are quite elderly—"

She didn't expect to be rounded on like a common criminal by that redheaded up-

start of a sergeant. "I know who you are, Mary Dominic Hughes. I know your father was ambassador to France. Your uncle is a congressman. One of your brothers is married to a Hollywood superstar and one of your sisters to a European prince. None of it matters to me. I'm here to find a killer and I won't let you charm me or bribe me out of it."

Mary Dominic wasn't often taken aback, but Mike Maguire had managed it. "Surely you don't think one of us is a murderer."

"I keep an open mind until all the evidence is in," Mike said like a defiant schoolboy. "One of you may have seen or heard something we should know."

The nuns tried hard to remain serene and cooperative, but as Mary Dominic had feared, the older ones were terribly upset, and Clare Francis, the cook, asked if she might do some extra baking to calm her nerves. "I can't settle, Mother," she complained, "and I know I won't sleep. I might as well be useful."

They might have managed without difficulty if there had been only one questioning, but Mike Maguire's parting words were "I'll be back."

It was midnight when Mary Dominic climbed the staircase

to her third floor cell and found Sharon's letter. Often newly accepted members found themselves overwhelmed with feelings of unworthiness, or a terrible longing to return to the world, and shared this in imprudent letters that Mary Dominic later returned after long discussions. She expected Sharon's to be of that kind and would have waited to read it until morning except for the circumstances of her death.

She read quickly. Then she folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. Mike Maguire should be told, she knew, but she didn't want him using Sharon's history to intimidate the community. Whatever the girl had been, during her months with the Daughters of Elias God had touched her heart. She had behaved well, in defiance of her past. She had been loved. Mary Dominic could imagine Mike Maguire using Sharon's history as a bludgeon to assault everything the community believed in. She was determined to prevent it. And she knew more than Mike Maguire—she knew the motive.

"It's absurd to think one of us harmed Sister Sharon," she told the community early the next day, choosing her words to jog their memories without alarming them. "It's almost as absurd to think one of our retreatants

could have acted so wrongfully. But people do make enemies, and it's possible that someone who disliked Sister Sharon or bore her a grudge could have come here pretending to be a retreatant. I think it would be wise for us to consider everything that happened yesterday. If any of you recall something out of the ordinary, no matter how small or how remote it may seem, I wish to be told."

She had hardly left for her office than Sister Vincent hurried after her. "Mother," she gasped. "I forgot to give you Zebulon's message." And Vincent poured out her tale. "It sounded so farfetched, I was sure he'd seen it on television. A woman shooting one of the nuns, indeed!"

A woman? From Sharon's letter, Mary Dominic would have expected a man.

And then she remembered Gabriela's shaving woman.

"Sister Vincent, ask the community to pray for a speedy conclusion to this matter," she said. "Please ask Sister Gabriela to come to my office, and tell Zebulon I'd like to see him this afternoon."

When Gabriela arrived at the office, her radiant smile once more in evidence despite the upset of having the police in and out, Mary Dominic asked, "That woman you spoke of to

me yesterday, Mrs. Prestavolta. Did you see her face clearly?"

Gabriela's smile dimmed. "Oh, yes, Mother. I noticed her when she registered—such a terrible face. So empty. There was no peace in that face, Mother. No joy. And I saw her clearly while she was shaving. Her back was to me but her face was reflected in the mirror. Fortunately I was standing out of range of the mirror or she would have noticed me." Gabriela's smile faded entirely. "I felt bad that she left without wanting any spiritual direction."

"Could you draw her face, do you think?"

"Yes, of course, Mother."

"I would like you to do so. And also draw the face of our foundress from her portrait in the upper hallway. And one other, of your own choosing. Then I would like you to draw the same faces, but with men's haircuts. And then once again, with men's haircuts and beards. Could you have the drawings ready by lunchtime?"

"Yes, Mother, if I don't labor over them."

"They needn't be finished to perfection," Mary Dominic said, "as long as the features are recognizable."

Gabriela nodded and left at once to execute her task. There was something to be said for

pre-Vatican II training, Mary Dominic thought. No question, no argument, no hesitation—just a simple "Yes." Gabriela probably didn't even wonder why she had been asked to make the drawings. If she did wonder, she would most likely assume it was a kind of penance for her "sin" of the day before.

Mary Dominic had the drawings when Mike Maguire showed up that afternoon. She greeted him with a beautiful smile. "Before we call the community for questioning, something has been brought to my attention that I think you should share."

"I'm not in the mood for games, sister," Mike said, glowering at her from his six foot four height. "Once upon a time I might have agreed that all nuns were angels. Now I know better. They're just people, and people are capable of surprising things."

"Once upon a time," Mary Dominic echoed softly. "Does that mean you no longer believe in God?"

Mike glared. "That has nothing to do with this investigation."

"I see." Mary Dominic made a mental note to put Mike Maguire on the prayer list. "Mr. Maguire, one of the sisters came to me with a fantastic tale. One of the neighborhood children

apparently saw the shooting. He's waiting in the parlor. I haven't heard his story yet. I thought you'd like to be present." She swept out with great dignity, leaving Mike to follow.

Zebulon was waiting in a rose-colored Queen Anne chair, a platter of chocolate chip cookies and a pitcher of lemonade at his side and a beatific expression on his face. He rose when Mary Dominic entered and cast a curious look at Mike. "Is he police?" he asked Mary Dominic.

"Yes, Zebulon. This is Sergeant Mike Maguire. Sergeant, meet Zebulon, one of our friends. Now if you'll tell me what you told Sister Vincent, Zeb—"

Zebulon enjoyed telling his tale. He had seen it all; the grayhaired woman checking her surroundings, aiming and firing the gun, hiding it afterwards in her purse.

"She didn't see me. I was in a tree up high," Zeb confided. "When I saw her aim the gun, I scooted down. She saw me after she put the gun away, but I ran." He frowned. "That was a funny kind of lady."

"Most ladies don't shoot people," Mary Dominic agreed.

"Different funny," Zebulon persisted. "If I could take some of these cookies home with me, I might remember more."

"You may take all of them,"

Mary Dominic agreed. "What was funny about the lady?"

"The pocketbook. She held it funny. Like she wasn't used to having one."

Mike Maguire was letting Mary Dominic run the show. "Zebulon, I have some pictures here I'd like you to look at." She unfolded the three drawings of women. Gabriela had included St. Therese as her choice. Mary Dominic held back a chuckle. It was probably the first time the saint had been included in a rogues' gallery.

Zebulon stabbed Mrs. Prestavolta's picture instantly. "That's her! That's the lady with the gun."

"Thank you, Zeb. Now, Mr. Maguire, if you'd care to look at these—" and Mary Dominic showed him the men's pictures, three clean-shaven, three bearded. He passed over St. Therese and the foundress. The drawings of "Mrs. Prestavolta" held his attention.

"You know him," Mary Dominic guessed.

He looked as if he'd like to swear. Instead he said, "Everyone knows him. Frank 'Ouzo' Ferrante. A dozen aliases. Suspected of numerous crimes. I don't think we can nail him. He's slippery."

"Zebulon, please show the sergeant Mrs. Prestavolta's picture."

Zeb was pleased to do so, and even more pleased to be dismissed with the bulging bag of cookies clutched safely in his hand.

"Prestavolta-Ouzo shot Sister Sharon, it seems." Mary Dominic handed Maguire Sharon's letter. "And this explains why."

"The bullet itself didn't kill her," Mike said. "She was poisoned by it. It was treated with nicotine. A single drop of the pure stuff is lethal." He thrust his fingers through his hair, standing it up like a peacock's tail. "Where did you get the drawings?"

"Our Sister Gabriela is a talented artist. She doesn't know her Mrs. Prestavolta is a man. Perhaps now you might not need to question the whole community again today? And the retreatants might be allowed to leave?"

Mike knew when he was licked. "I'll want to see this Sister Gabriela and Sister Vincent. That should do it."

"We've been asking God to provide a speedy solution," Mary Dominic said. She had remem-

bered Mike Maguire when he ruffled his hair. He had been an altar boy at her father's funeral twenty years before.

"In my book, a real God would blast that scum off the face of the earth," he said.

"Let the wheat and tares grow up together until the harvest," Mary Dominic reminded him, "lest in pulling up the tares, the young wheat come, too."

The second questioning went far more graciously than the first. Mike Maguire and Mary Dominic parted on sufficiently friendly terms for him to call her several weeks later.

"I guess there's some kind of justice in the world after all," he said. "Ouzo was killed in a freak accident. A bridge he was traveling on alone collapsed under him. No one else was hurt."

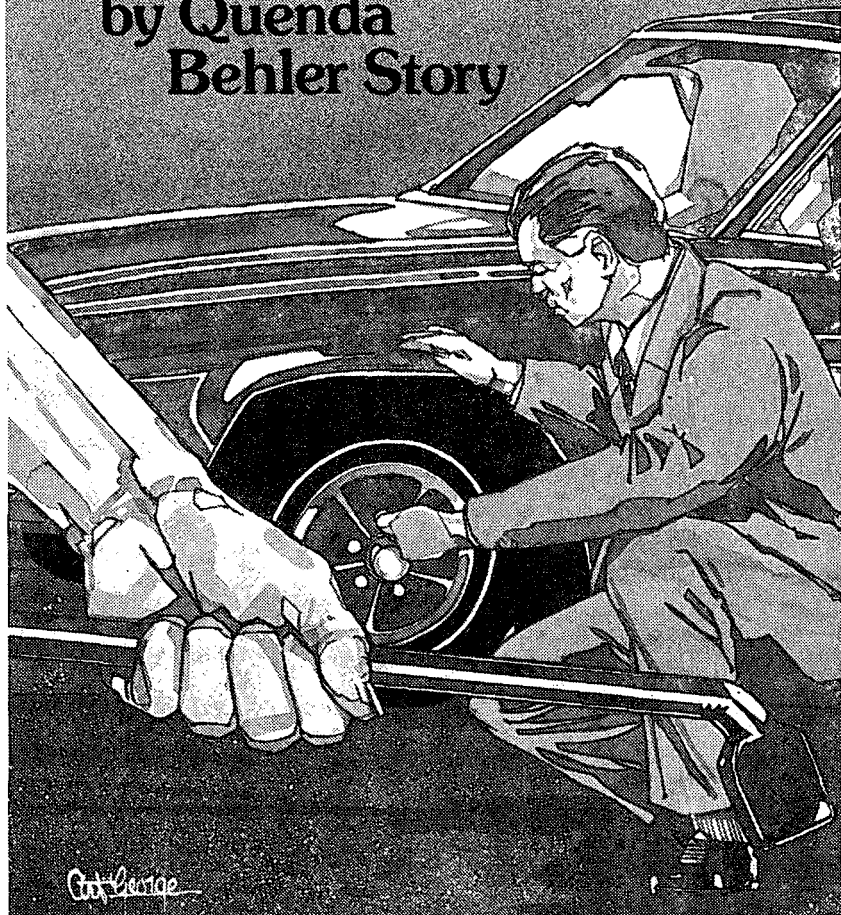
"Indeed," Mary Dominic murmured. Mike cleared his throat.

"I was wondering if you nuns had been praying about it."

Mary Dominic smiled. "We always pray for God's mercy," she said.

Must All My Secrets Be Told?

by Quenda
Behler Story



Arthur George

Illustration by Arthur George

The dirty gray November sky hung so low and heavy over the Westnedge Public School that the sky looked almost as if it were trying to hide the place. That might not be, Louise thought, a bad idea. Westnedge was an ugly collection of additions and extensions that had been stuck onto the original structure until the school appeared to have been put together by the children themselves. For the last twenty-five years Louise had been the first person to arrive there after the janitor unlocked the doors in the morning. Any change in that routine would have been unusual—what was happening there today was incredible. A half-dozen police cars were parked up on the school lawn, making deep tire cuts in the rain-softened grass, even though the only car in the parking lot was Fred Myers' red Ford. There were at least a dozen people standing around Fred's car: state troopers, the county sheriff, some deputies, and the school principal, Mr. Williams. One of the deputies was standing portable posts up around the parking lot perimeter and was stringing yellow tape to them.

Louise parked her car in the street and got out so she could walk over to Fred's car to see what was going on, but one of

the deputies, a young man she used to scold for running in the halls, moved towards her, blocking her way.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Porter," he said. "This is police business. Civilians can't come past the yellow line."

Louise started to tell him that, as school secretary, everything that happened at her school was her business, but then she stopped. She didn't like to argue with people who were just doing their job, Lord knows she had to put up with enough of that herself. Besides, bad news never stayed secret for long anyway, and whatever had happened in the parking lot looked like very bad news indeed.

In the school administration offices, she found Deputy Bill Frankel sitting at her desk, using her phone. She stepped directly into his line of vision and stared silently at him. She was aware that although she was a short grayhaired woman a bit on the heavy side, she had tremendous physical presence. During the bitter argument she'd had with her daughter the evening before at her daughter's house, Emmy had accused her of "being deliberately intimidating," and in a sudden flash of insight, Louise realized that was exactly what she was doing to Deputy Frankel.

He responded properly, though. He quickly hung up her phone and said, "Morning, Mrs. Porter. Ain't it terrible about Mr. Myers?"

Like so many of Westnedge's graduates, Bill's diploma certifying him as educated was open to question.

"Isn't," Louise said severely, "what terrible?"

"Didn't anybody tell you?" Bill asked enthusiastically. "Mr. Myers was bent over changing a tire when somebody sneaked up behind him and beat his head in with a lug wrench. Killed him dead! You should see it! Blood and brains all over his car and the ground and everywhere."

Louise stared at him, open-mouthed with shock. "Right here at our school!" she said incredulously. The school had always had its share of vandalism and petty theft, but nothing amounting to real violence had ever happened there before.

"The crime lab guy from the state police says that Mr. Myers was probably killed around eight or nine o'clock last night. Sheriff Collins figures Mr. Myers found his flat when he left school to go home. Sheriff figures Mr. Myers musta walked into town to get some tools to fix his flat because the lug iron that killed him was marked property of Davison's Service

Station. Sheriff figures that Mr. Myers got back here with Davison's tools and was bent over, working on his tire, and whammo! Somebody got him." Bill illustrated with a graphic karate chop that made Louise flinch.

Fred Myers had been the Westnedge school counselor and guidance director. Louise had not exactly liked Fred—she'd considered him pushy and rude—but she had also considered him to be one of the few people at the school besides herself who didn't just put in time. Fred wasn't one to sit in his office and wait for kids to come in and ask for help, nor did he see that help as something that should be limited to the confines of the school. He was perfectly capable of marching into someone's house to tell them what they were doing wrong with their kids, and he would keep going back to their house until he felt they were doing it right. He was exactly what Louise's daughter had accused her of being: a busybody, telling people how to run their lives.

"Does anyone know who killed him?"

"Sheriff Collins has lots of ideas," Bill assured her. "He figures he'll make an arrest in a day or two."

Louise sniffed disbelievingly. She remembered Bobby Collins

as a class clown who was always being sent to the principal's office for not completing his assignments.

"You'll have to find someplace else to sit, Bill. I need my desk now."

"I can't," he insisted. "I have to use the phone. Sheriff Collins wants me to call the television station at the county seat so they can get here in time to take pictures for the early news report."

That really irritated Louise. The school would get enough bad publicity out of this without help from Sheriff Collins. "You get your buns out of my chair, Bill Frankel. If you want to call somebody, use the radio in your patrol car. That's what the taxpayers put it there for."

Her anger got Bill moving, but at the office door he had to step to one side and wait while his boss came through. At six one and two hundred plus pounds, Sheriff Collins left no room to share. Louise suspected he won elections on size alone. People seemed to feel anyone that big ought to be in charge.

"Mrs. Porter," Sheriff Collins boomed at Louise, "you're just the person I need. I want you to sit down with Fred Myers' files and sort out his information on gangs here at the school."

"Gangs!" Louise said incredulously. "There are no gangs at this school."

"These kids might be up to more than you think, Mrs. Porter. I know when I was a kid here, I woulda been in deep trouble if folks had known even half of what all I did." He grinned at her as if she had been up to something with him and winked.

Louise grimly repressed the urge to tell him he hadn't been fooling anybody. Because maybe she didn't know as much as she thought she did. Until last night she had believed she and her daughter were friends.

"What I mean is," she said carefully, "should I be the one checking Fred's files? How would I recognize information that might identify a murderer?"

"You don't have to," he chuckled. Even when he was a kid, he was always chuckling and ho-hoing. He must have thought it made people like him. "All you have to do is what I tell you: make a list of the teenage boys Fred had trouble with during the last couple of years. We'll take it from there."

Louise stared at him bleakly. He and Fred had had bitter arguments about juvenile problems. The sheriff knew the school counselor dealt with a variety of misdemeanors ranging from truancy to possession of minor amounts of marijuana. The sheriff had wanted the offenders reported to his office so

he could "make an example of them," as he had promised the voters in his campaign platform, but Fred had refused to cooperate, saying Sheriff Collins should stick to giving out traffic tickets, since that was what he did best.

"I warned Fred," the sheriff was saying, "that he'd get in over his head. It's one thing to tell kids what college to go to, it's a whole nother ball game to deal with delinquents. That takes a professional." Sheriff Collins' face glowed with vindication, making Louise wonder if he didn't like his teenage delinquent theory so much he might be overlooking other possibilities.

"What was Fred doing here at eight o'clock at night?" she asked. "The janitor locks the building up tight at five." The school board had given the janitor—probably the single most indispensable person in the school—salaried status so they would not have to pay him overtime. Since then he had locked the doors promptly at five, referring complaints from people who were not yet ready to leave to the "cheap SOB's in charge."

"I figure," the sheriff answered her, "it took Fred a while to walk into town to get tools to fix his flat."

"Davison's Service Station," Louise pointed out, "is about a twenty minute walk from here.

It couldn't have taken Fred three hours to get there and back."

"You have to understand," Sheriff Collins explained patiently, "the time of death is only an educated guess. It could be off an hour either way."

"But even if Fred was killed as early as seven, that's two whole hours just to get some tools and change a tire."

"Fred wasn't any ball of fire about mechanical things. It likely took him longer than it might take you or me. Now, I don't want you worrying about the details of Fred's murder," Sheriff Collins said. "You get me that list, and I'll do the detective work."

Louise stood up, her lips compressed into a thin, skeptical line. "All right," she said, "whatever you say."

Fred's office was on the second floor. On her way up the stairs, Louise stopped in front of the tall casement windows on the landing to watch the school buses unload by the main entrance. Her granddaughter wouldn't be getting off, not as sick as Jennifer had been yesterday. Maybe Emmy would relent today and take Jennifer to a doctor. I tried to raise her to have some sense, Louise thought, not to get involved in some off-the-wall religion that didn't believe in doctors. Beyond the school buses, the

county ambulance pulled slowly into the parking lot. Poor Fred, lying dead on the ground, and here I am, I can't even stop thinking about my own problems long enough to help find out who killed him. Of course, the way Sheriff Collins is going about it—Louise started back up the stairs—we'll probably never know who did it, anyway.

Fred didn't keep files as such in his office. All he had there was a logbook with the names of students he helped, or thought he should be helping. For a moment, Louise wondered if he'd ever put her granddaughter's name in his book: child doesn't receive adequate medical attention because mother's a religious nut. Louise shivered. Fred's office was terribly cold. He always kept his office thermostat turned way down because, he said, warm air makes you passive.

Louise started making the list Sheriff Collins wanted by picking all of the names out of Fred's logbook that appeared to involve more than an ordinary problem. Since Sheriff Collins had asked for only the names of teenage boys, she divided his list into two columns: one column with the names he'd requested, and a second column with all the other names she'd taken. Then she went downstairs to what used to be the

furnace room when the school was still heated with coal, and was now the file room.

Twenty-five years ago, when Louise started as school secretary, all the student records were kept in skinny paper folders in a three drawer cabinet in the principal's office. Westnedge had since filled up with people who worked thirty miles away in the state capital but were willing to spend their waking hours on the road so they could sleep in a rural community. Besides overwhelming Westnedge with children, the bedroom people seemed also to propagate documents with an orgasmic enthusiasm: immunization certificates, attendance records, performance testing results, records from previous schools. Some days Louise felt that if another parent came in with even just one more piece of paper for her to deal with, she would drop to her knees and beg for mercy. When the school board, at their last meeting, had discussed adopting a requirement that every child have a birth certificate on file at the school, Louise had stood up and said that she personally would feel like an idiot asking some mother for proof of the existence of a child standing right there in front of her.

As a bonus for Sheriff Collins, Louise pulled all the files

of the names on his list, and when she got back to her desk, she divided the files into two piles: one pile of teenage boys, and one pile of all the others. Then she started to read the "all others" pile, beginning with a kindergartner named Michele LeBlanc, partly because Michele's name seemed to be the most frequent one in Fred's book and partly because Louise recognized her address. Jennifer's other grandmother had grown up in that house. Alma Godrich had lived there until she married and moved across the street from Louise. Alma's parents eventually sold the house to a realty company able to command a much higher rent than the place was worth because there were so few places to rent in Westnedge.

Alma's little boy grew up and married Louise's daughter, who eventually divorced him because he was "lazy and didn't have any future." Why, Louise must have asked Emmy a hundred times, hadn't Emmy thought of that before she married him? Last night Emmy told Louise they wouldn't have gotten married at all if Louise hadn't been so dead set against it. I didn't realize I was so powerful, Louise thought bitterly. I wonder what would have happened if I'd said she shouldn't jump off cliffs. Would she

have taken up hang-gliding?

According to Michele LeBlanc's file, Michele's mother was a single parent who had moved into the school district just before school started. Michele had been in kindergarten only about three weeks when her teacher became concerned about how thin and withdrawn the child was. The teacher had asked Fred to investigate because it alarmed her for a child to be so quiet as to be conspicuous in a room full of five-year-olds.

Louise rocked back in her chair, rubbing her eyes. She hadn't slept at all the night before. Maybe she was making too much of Jennifer's illness. After all, when Emmy was little, Louise hadn't trotted her off to the doctor every time she was sick, and Emmy had survived. Louise shook her head wearily. If she didn't start concentrating on what she was doing instead of worrying about Jennifer, she'd never get this done. She picked up Michele LeBlanc's file again and started reading. Fred's notes in the file were amazing. If he dealt with everybody in the high-handed way he'd dealt with Rita LeBlanc, it was a miracle that he hadn't been beaten to death years before. He had apparently taken one look at Rita LeBlanc and decided she was "too emotionally dependent" on

her child to be able to go out to get a job to feed it, so he announced to Rita LeBlanc that she should go to the county seat and apply for ADC. She must not have done what he wanted because, according to his notes, he'd been back to her house badgering her about it at least three more times during the following weeks.

Mr. Williams' door opened, and he, Sheriff Collins, and Bill Frankel walked out. Mr. Williams looked as sulky and ill-tempered as any third-grader. "The phone hasn't stopped ringing," he complained. "Parents have been calling wanting to know what all the police cars were doing here. You weren't at your desk, so I had to talk to them." Mr. Williams hated talking to parents.

"Have you got that list ready that I asked for?" Sheriff Collins asked her.

"Yes, and I've also pulled the student files of everyone on the list for you."

"Well, that was real nice of you, Mrs. Porter, but we'll just go visit the boys in person and see what they have to say for themselves. We don't need copies of their report cards."

"Sheriff Collins," Louise said, putting her hand on the second pile of student files, the ones she'd described to herself as "all others," "I think you ought to include some of the people in

these files in your investigation."

He leaned over her shoulder and looked at the file she'd been reading. "Michele LeBlanc," he read off the file label, "five years old." He winked at Bill Frankel and then said to her, "I don't think we have to worry too much about five-year-olds. It's been my experience kids aren't dangerous until they're at least six and a half."

"If you would read Michele's file," Louise said insistently, "you'd see an example of how Fred treated people, and you'd see that there must have been a lot of grownup people around who hated him. Investigating only teenage boys would be stupid."

Sheriff Collins flushed. "I know damn well how Fred treated people. I had to deal with him often enough myself." The pager on his belt interrupted with a nasty, buzzing sound. He picked up her phone—without asking—dialed a number, identified himself, listened intently for a moment, and then hung up, shouting at Bill Frankel, "The state police have made an arrest!" The two of them took off like the place was on fire, leaving Louise standing there still holding Michele LeBlanc's file.

He hadn't taken his list, either.

"Thank goodness that's all

over with," Mr. Williams said. "Maybe now," he gave Louise a nasty look, "we can all get back to work." He turned around and marched self-righteously into his office.

Louise took a deep breath and held it for the count of ten, then expelled it as slowly as she could, a relaxation technique she had learned from a magazine article about stress. Maybe it was all over. The eleven o'clock bell was ringing, and the hall outside her door swelled with noise. One more hour and the kindergartners would be getting on the noon bus to go home. Her day hadn't even started. The morning mail was still scattered on the radiator cover behind her desk where somebody, probably Bill Frankel, had tossed it. She picked it up and started sorting it into the teachers' cubbyholes built into a cabinet by the door. That was what she usually did first thing in the morning.

There was a letter addressed to Fred.

Louise stared at it for a long time. It must be school business. If the letter was personal, it would have been addressed to his house. Anyway, Sheriff Collins had told her to go through Fred's papers.

The letter turned out to be a copy of a letter that had been mailed to Michele LeBlanc's mother by a Mrs. Wickert, an

ADC caseworker. Across the top of the copy was a penciled note to Fred from Mrs. Wickert saying she had written the original letter to Rita LeBlanc as Fred had requested.

In the letter itself, Mrs. Wickert told Rita LeBlanc that questions had been raised about her ability to provide adequately for her child; that if those questions came up again, the Protective Services Section of the County Welfare Offices would be ordered to investigate. If Mrs. LeBlanc, in fact, could not support her child, she should bring in the necessary documentation, and Mrs. Wickert would then determine if Mrs. LeBlanc was eligible for aid.

That was Fred all right. Once he got on your case, he wouldn't get off until you did what he wanted you to do. Which, Louise reflected, was exactly the way Emmy had accused her of being.

Louise finished the mail and was trying to get a speech written about the school's need for additional classrooms for Mr. Williams to deliver to the school board when the door opened and Jennifer's other grandma walked in.

"I have to talk to you," Alma Godrich said insistently. "You've got to do something about your daughter."

Louise didn't care to share her family problems with any-

one who might wander through the administration offices or, worse yet, Mr. Williams, so she took Alma to the small restroom that was right down the hall. An eighth grader passing through the hall looked at Alma and Louise, and, without being asked, displayed his hall pass to them by holding it up against his chest as if he thought he was warding off the evil eye.

Louise motioned Alma into the restroom and locked the door behind them. It was kept locked most of the time anyway. Westnedge students didn't seem to be able to read the sign on the door that said FOR ADMINISTRATION AND FACULTY USE ONLY.

"Saturday," Alma said grimly, "for the third weekend in a row, Emmy wouldn't let Tom take Jennifer for his weekend visit. She keeps telling Tom that Jennifer is sick."

Louise didn't want to cope with the anger in Alma's eyes. She turned away to their reflections in the restroom mirror. Two middle-aged women—more than middle-aged, really—who had never liked each other, not when they were still children growing up in the same small town, not now that they were inexorably tied by bonds of blood and love to the same small grandchild.

"I went over there this morn-

ing," Alma said, "to see how Jennifer was. I found her mother and some other people from that church, the one Emmy goes to, they were standing around praying, and they told me Jennifer wasn't getting well because she didn't have enough faith." Alma's pale blue eyes glittered with intensity. "Your daughter's gone off the deep end with this religious stuff, and you have to do something about it. Jennifer needs to see a doctor, and she needs to see one right away. You have to tell Emmy to take her."

Louise stared down at the dirty white tiles on the floor, noticing that in the corner the tiles were coming loose. She'd already told Emmy to take Jennifer to a doctor. Emmy had told her that she wasn't Jennifer's mother, and it wasn't up to her to decide what was best for Jennifer.

"Jennifer has a virus of some kind, Alma. A doctor probably couldn't do anything for her anyway. There isn't an antibiotic in the world that will cure a virus. You know that, Alma."

"I know that child has been sick since Halloween. You go over there and see for yourself." Alma's voice dropped almost to a whisper as if she were afraid to hear what she was saying. "Louise, when I was there this

morning, Jennifer was so feverish I don't think she knew who I was."

Someone knocked on the restroom door, and Louise turned gratefully to the sound. "We'll be done in here in a minute," she called. To Alma, she said: "Emmy's got too much sense not to notice if Jennifer were in real danger. Jennifer was probably just too tired to talk to you. I'm sure everything will be all right, and besides, Alma, if we run around making a fuss over what turns out to be nothing, Emmy might not let us see Jennifer again." When Louise heard herself say that, she stopped, stone-cold. That wasn't what she'd meant to say at all. Emmy would never do anything like that.

Alma clearly thought that was exactly what Emmy would do. "She won't let Tom take Jennifer now half the time he's supposed to. If she keeps it up, we'll take her to court. We won't stand for it."

Whoever was outside the restroom door knocked again. "I'll stop over at Emmy's after work," Louise promised. "I'll talk to Emmy about a doctor then." Louise opened the door and the second grade teacher walked in. She looked at Louise and Alma curiously.

Alma didn't move. "I don't think you should wait that long."

"It's not our decision to make, Alma."

After Alma finally left, Louise decided she'd better get some lunch. She was so hungry she was getting lightheaded, but she didn't want to eat in the school cafeteria. Someone there would be bound to ask her how Jennifer was. Most of the teachers were her friends. Some of them had been her friends all her life, but she didn't want advice from them about what she should do. She had lived in a small town long enough to know that when you listen to someone's advice and then don't take it, you've got a new problem to go along with the old problem. But if she went into town to eat, everyone she ran into there would want to talk about Fred, and Louise didn't feel up to that. Finally she decided to get something she could eat at her desk.

Edwards Cash and Carry Groceries, the only grocery store in town, stocked ready-made sandwiches that they would heat in their microwave oven for an extra twenty cents. When Sally Edwards saw Louise come in and head for the freezer where the sandwiches were kept, she told the stockboy to take her place at the cash register and walked back to the freezer with Louise. When Sally was only six years old and Louise was

twelve, Louise used to babysit with Sally while Sally's parents went bowling. Now that they were both grandmothers, it surprised Louise to remember that once there seemed to be so much difference in their ages.

"Did you hear," Sally asked, "about the state police arresting Jim Duncan?"

"Is he the one they arrested? Do they think he killed Fred?" Jim Duncan, like his father before him, was notorious for getting drunk, tearing something—or somebody—up, and not remembering it the next day.

"They found him passed out in the alley behind Davison's Service Station with dried blood all over him," Sally said. Sally always knew what was happening at the county jail because her husband Joe delivered coffee and doughnuts there every morning. "Joe said the state police were all set to charge Jim with Fred's murder when Bill Frankel told them that 'maybe' the blood came from yesterday afternoon when he arrested Jim for being drunk and disorderly. Bill said Jim resisted arrest, and Bill 'might have' knocked Jim around a bit. Bill also said that he'd had Jim locked up until early this morning, so there was no way Jim could have killed Fred Myers."

Louise selected a turkey sandwich with white cheese.

"Here," Sally offered, "let me put that into the microwave for you. Joe said he heard the sheriff say that gang of Mexican kids living up by the lake was probably involved."

Louise snorted. "If Sheriff Collins sees two teenage boys together, he thinks he's looking at a gang. If they're Mexican, he thinks it's an international gang."

Sally snapped the microwave door shut and set its controls. "Who do you think might have killed Fred?"

"Almost anybody who knew him."

"Boy, that's the truth," Sally agreed. She had set the timer on the microwave a little too long and the cheese melted, dripping out onto the plastic wrap around the sandwich. "Do you remember how Fred harassed my youngest brother and his wife? Wouldn't let them alone until they had little Joey's hearing tested. It wound up costing them almost a thousand dollars. Practically took the food right off their table. It was outrageous."

"Fred was right, though," Louise said thoughtfully. "Joey did need a hearing aid. He's done much better in school since he got it."

Sally looked at her sharply. Sally had complained about Fred's interference a dozen times

before, and Louise had never expressed anything but sympathy. "Right or wrong," Sally said indignantly, "they didn't have the money, and they had to go without things they needed so they could pay for it."

Talking about Fred, for some reason, had made Louise think about Michele LeBlanc. "Sally," she asked, "have you met the woman who moved into the old Godrich house? Her name is Rita LeBlanc."

"Sort of," Sally said. "She comes in here for her groceries, of course, but I've never really talked to her. Oh, I've tried. You know I like to get acquainted with all my customers, but when I say something to her, she won't even answer. She's either deaf or the rudest person I've ever met."

"Maybe she's shy," Louise suggested. "Fred thought she might not have enough money to live on. He wanted her to apply for welfare, but she wouldn't do it."

Sally snorted as she shoved Louise's sandwich into a plastic bag and rang up two dollars on the cash register. "She brings in her food stamps, just like half the other people on the old north side."

That news startled Louise. Rita LeBlanc had been getting welfare all along. At least she'd been getting food stamps. Why

hadn't she told Fred? Or had she? Sally wanted to talk some more, but Louise mumbled something about Mr. Williams waiting and left. When she got back to school, she put her sandwich into a drawer in her desk and went to the faculty restroom, locking the door behind her. She wanted to think about why someone would take food stamps but wouldn't ask for money so she could take care of her children. What would be the difference? The only thing she could think of was that almost anyone below a certain income level could get food stamps, but you had to have children to get ADC.

And you had to prove you had children.

When the school board had discussed adopting a requirement that new students show birth certificates before enrolling, she had laughed at them. Imagine asking someone to prove the existence of a child standing right there. But, of course, birth certificates proved more than just existence. The ADC people required birth certificates because they wanted to be certain that the child standing in front of them had not been borrowed for the occasion.

When Louise finally came out of the faculty and administration restroom, she thought

she knew who had killed Fred Myers and why. She had some trouble persuading Sheriff Collins that she might be right, but he did agree to question Rita LeBlanc.

It was almost time for the three o'clock bell when he came to Louise's office to tell her about talking to Rita LeBlanc. "All I said to the woman was that I wanted to ask her a few questions about Fred, and she started confessing right then and there. When I realized what she was saying, I had to stop her to give her a Miranda warning."

The three o'clock bell rang, dismissing school—where there had been silence, there were suddenly swollen bulges of noise: feet pounding, lockers slamming, hundreds of young voices piercing and shattering the quiet.

Louise smiled thinly, meagerly amused by the stunned expression on Sheriff Collins' face. "Sounds different when you're a grownup, doesn't it."

Sheriff Collins cleared his throat. "Well, anyway, the LeBlanc woman told me that she used to have a baby of her own that the authorities took away from her because they said she neglected it, so she kidnapped Michele as a replacement. When Michele got to be five, she brought her to school

here because Westnedge doesn't ask for a birth certificate. When Fred got after her to apply for ADC, he made a big problem for her because ADC would have insisted on a birth certificate and she sure couldn't explain how come she didn't have one. She told Fred she could take care of Michele just fine without ADC, but he wanted her to prove it. He didn't think she had enough money to take care of the kid properly. While he was on his way to Davison's to get some tools to fix his tire, he walked right by her house, and I figure, seeing as how he was there anyway, he stopped to tell her he was gonna sic the child welfare people on her. She kept him talking until dark, and then followed him back to school. When she saw her chance," Sheriff Collins paused and shrugged, "she took it."

"Where's Rita LeBlanc now?" Louise asked.

"Over at the county seat. She'll be formally charged this afternoon once she gets a lawyer."

"What about Michele? Can you find her real parents?"

"That's the one good thing to come out of this. Rita LeBlanc told us who they were. I already called them, and they're flying out this afternoon."

When he talked about Michele's parents, Sheriff Collins'

face softened into a pleased expression that reminded Louise of when he'd been a safety patrol boy. He hadn't been the brightest student they'd ever had at Westnedge, but he had been one of the better crossing guards, always keeping a careful eye on the smaller children. Louise squeezed her hands together and took a deep breath. "Sheriff Collins," she said, "I want you to do something for me."

"Anything you want, Mrs. Porter. I owe you one."

"I want you to go with me to my daughter's house," Louise said, speaking very carefully. "I want you to tell Emmy that you know Jennifer is sick, and that if she's not willing to take Jennifer to a doctor, you will, even if," Louise had to stop for a breath, "even if that means you do whatever it is you do with neglected children."

Sheriff Collins stared soberly at her. "If the child is in danger, what I do is I take custody of the child."

"If you have to, I want you to. I've got to do something about Jennifer, no matter what Emmy might say." Tears cut frantic paths down Louise's face. "My God, Fred Myers died trying to help a little girl he hardly knew at all." But it had been easier for Fred, Louise thought resentfully. When he finished with

a name in his logbook, he just went on to the next name. He didn't know he'd wind up getting killed.

In the end, they took Jennifer to the hospital without using any threats at all.

When Sheriff Collins saw Jennifer's yellow, blotchy face and heard her ragged and irregular breath, he simply wrapped her up in the blanket that lay on the bed beside her, and carried her in his arms to his patrol car. Emmy, stone-silent, got into the passenger seat, and he handed Jennifer into her arms while Louise climbed into the back seat. At the hospital, Jennifer was diagnosed as having infectious hepatitis. Another day, the doctor said, and her kidneys would have shut down entirely.

Later that night both Louise and Emmy stood by Jennifer's bed, watching an intravenous tube drip glucose fluids into a wisp of a vein in Jennifer's arm.

"Will they let you stay the night here with her?" Louise asked Emmy.

"Yes," Emmy answered. She stroked Jennifer's forehead and then looked directly at Louise with her blue eyes that were so much like Louise's own. "Mother, there's something I want to say to you. I had already decided that it was God's will that I take Jennifer to a

doctor; otherwise He would have made her well. It was more convenient for me to have Sheriff Collins there to drive us, so I'm glad," Emmy said defiantly, "that you brought him."

Louise cramped back everything she might have said and reached over to pat Emmy's arm. "That's fine, darling. Just so everything's all right now. I'll come back tomorrow morning."

Sheriff Collins fell into step with Louise as she walked down the hall to the hospital entrance. He had been waiting outside the door to Jennifer's room so he could give Louise a ride home. "Fred would never have let Emmy get away with that," he chuckled. "Fred would have made her admit she almost let her daughter die."

"Emmy's a grownup now," Louise said. "She makes mistakes just like anybody else. Making mistakes is the risk people take when they make decisions."

Sheriff Collins winked at her as he reached forward to open the heavy entrance door for her.

"That sounds almost like you intend to start letting Emmy make those decisions herself."

Louise stopped halfway out the door and stared at him.

"Well, what I mean is," he said defensively, "you've always followed Emmy around telling her what to do. Everyone knows that. The kids used to joke about it when Emmy was still in school. You're lucky Fred never got on your case."

She stood, still staring at him, almost paralyzed with revelation. She was thinking about all the times she had said one thing, and Emmy, almost automatically, had said the opposite. Maybe it was time to stop giving Emmy the benefit of her opinion. Maybe if she didn't give it so often, it might have more effect when she did. That didn't mean that Bobby Collins had any business giving her the benefit of his.

"Apparently *Fred* didn't think I needed advice I didn't ask for," she said frigidly, and then she relaxed and smiled. "But maybe I could have used it."

FICTION

Bass Specialties

by Bob Tippee



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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In this, the one perfect moment of the day, Beth Ridgley can avow that she has done her best and that whatever subsequently goes wrong probably will be the fault of someone else. If only the moment could last.

Beth sighs, elbows on her metal desk facing the suite's outside door, and takes another sip of spiced tea from the china cup she uses on Tuesdays. The Southwest Sales Office of International Bass Specialties can be pleasant when properly arranged. And Beth Ridgley knows how to arrange things.

It shows in the spotless pot beneath the gurgling coffee maker. It shows in the neat fans of outdoor magazines on the low table in front of the visitor's couch. And it shows in the meticulously dusted frames bearing photographs of smiling men in baseball caps holding fat green fish caught, one presumes, on International Bass Specialties' rods, reels, and lures.

Beth's triumph, however, this shining beacon of early-morning commercial readiness, cannot last. And two office doors stand open on the rear wall to remind her of this sad verity.

Too soon, the suite door opens, and destruction begins. It is bald, pudding-faced, thirty-year-old Roger Hartman, who never rests.

"Got those tournament surveys ready yet?" he asks on his way to the coffee table where he pours himself a cup from a half-full pot, oblivious to the stream dripping onto the burner.

"I stayed late," Beth says. "I missed my widow's group meeting."

"Midnight oil: the stuff of excellence," he declares. Then he sips coffee, walks to her desk, and asks, "The guy from headquarters check in?"

"That would be Pat Waters. No."

"Hell of a thing, having to hold some big shot's hand while we're trying to get ready for a trade show. I'd feel better if I knew what he was up to. Not that I'm completely in the dark."

Beth will not let herself be curious. She will not.

"Would you sign some delivery notices?"

"Visibility! You bet." His ballpoint pen flutters over the papers as he talks. "And since you're not going to ask, I'll tell you what I think this visit's about: rationalization."

"Of course."

"I mean it. That's what they called it when they laid off two out of three salesmen up in Springfield. Rationalization."

"Goodness. Where will you go?"

"Funny, Beth. But I'm serious. I think they're onto the oldtimer."

"Mr. Petrie has been here twenty-nine years."

"And somehow he's managed to cram five years' worth of work into it all. Is he here yet?"

She looks over her left shoulder at Mr. Petrie's very obviously open door and very obviously empty office. "It wouldn't appear so."

"Good. A couple of things. Remember that special shipment I mentioned last month? The demonstrator package for the new line of spinning reels we're unveiling at the trade show?"

"You said something about special handling instructions."

"That's it. I guess it hasn't shown up yet. The thing is, it's super hush-hush. I doubt the oldtimer even knows about it. So if it comes up when Pat Waters is here . . ."

"I'll act like I never heard of it."

"Discretion! That's what I like most about you, Beth. Which brings me to the second thing."

The suite door swings open again.

"Hi, gang," warbles Matt Petrie, who wears one of his four grey suits and carries the same old briefcase and same old raincoat he never goes without. "You won't believe what happened on the expressway today."

Mr. Petrie has gorgeous silver hair and an extraordinary way of looking at things without seeing them. He has a fussy wife, two grown but spoiled children, five undisciplined grandchildren, and an inexplicable serenity.

"Maybe you could tell us after Pat Waters gets here," Roger says.

Mr. Petrie thinks about that a second. "That's a good idea, Roger. What about these young folks, Beth?" He drapes the raincoat over his briefcase and points to the ceiling with his right hand, which means something serious is coming. "While I've got you both here . . . Roger, did you know Beth was still working when I left last night?"

"Yes, Matt. She had work to do."

Mr. Petrie looks puzzled. He takes two deep breaths, looks sternly at Roger, and declares, "Oh."

Now is when Roger will say some smart-alecky thing that will make Mr. Petrie look even more foolish, and Mr. Petrie won't realize it until he has sat alone at his desk and thought about it, and it will be much too late when he finally figures out what to do, which will be wrong.

"I didn't mind a bit," Beth says before Roger can strike. "The tournament surveys, you know. Very interesting."

"Well, gosh, as long as you didn't mind," Mr. Petrie says with a nod. "Anything for me to sign?"

"Mr. Hartman handled it."

"Of course. Thank you, Roger. Well, back to the old salt mine." And he charges into his office and closes the door.

"Why do you cover for him?" Roger asks.

How on earth would Roger Hartman understand? He would have been in high school when Matt Petrie, his hair then a gorgeous blond, had rescued her from despair of the sudden, worst kind. It might have been the one thing Matt ever got right. And it didn't matter that he had come to her the next day full of apologies, calling it a mistake, promising it wouldn't happen again. She wished then and always that it would. She believes, even now, that it might, although it doesn't matter. The important thing is that someone, who happened to be Matt Petrie, had needed her when she had nearly lost hope of ever being needed again.

"Mr. Petrie is a nice man," Beth tells Roger Hartman.

He stares quizzically at her a moment. "That second thing. Remember the nightie you picked out for me a couple of weeks ago?"

Beth sighs. "Yes, I'll exchange it for you so you won't have to be seen in the lingerie department at Vandergalt's."

"Exchange it? She loves it."

"You had me buy a size eight. I was certain Mrs. Hartman would wear a twelve or fourteen."

He laughs. "Beth, Beth. It's for my niece."

Does he really think she believes him? "That would explain why you had me send it to, let me see . . ." She flips through calendar notes on her desk. "Fourteen Riverside Drive, Apartment Ten. Something sheer again? Blue this time?"

He looks uncomfortable. "Fine."

"I'll go at lunchtime. Of course, that may make me late getting back."

"Fine. Fine. And remember: discretion."

He scurries into his office. When his door slams shut Mr. Petrie rings Beth on the intercom.

"Beth?"

"Yes, Mr. Petrie. It wouldn't be anyone else."

"Of course."

"May I help you, sir?"

"Yes. It's why I called."

"So how may I help you, sir?"

"That's what I'm trying to remember. Oh yes, let's not say anything about that special shipment I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago. It's supposed to be a secret."

"What shipment, sir?"

"You know, that one I mentioned to you a couple of weeks . . . oh, I get it. That's very funny."

"Thank you, sir. If that's all, I really must . . ."

"Beth."

"Yes, sir?"

"I think I know why Pat Waters is coming."

"Why would that be, sir?"

"I think I'm finally going to get that promotion to regional manager. But let's not say anything about it."

"That would be very nice, sir. And I won't say anything."

"Thank you, Beth."

"Yes, sir." She hangs up, stands, and walks over to the coffee table to clean up after Roger Hartman.

Beth can hardly understand Pat Waters, who is not a man. Pat Waters speaks very rapidly. She is perhaps a couple of years younger than Roger Hartman, wants to be called "Miz," and does not ask what Beth wants to be called. She wears a tailored grey suit and beige blouse with paisley silk tie, has short hair and wire glasses, and wishes—as far as Beth can tell—to have a few words before Beth calls the salesmen out.

"Do you know why I'm here?" Ms. Waters asks, setting down her dark leather briefcase with brass trim and pulling up Beth's visitor's chair.

"I wouldn't know."

"Good. All I can say is something is missing."

"Goodness. Shall I call the police?"

"God, no! I mean, it's sensitive. New products. And, between you and me, if I can get to the bottom of things quickly and quietly it'll be good for my career."

"You seem to be doing quite well for such a young woman."

Ms. Waters cracks the first grin Beth has seen from her. "I started out as a secretary, just like you. Then I learned that all that matters in business is power. And all that matters with power is the way things turn out. So I started making things turn out my way. Now, tell me what happens when you get shipments from the factory."

Beth clears her throat. "A delivery notice comes in a day or so

in advance. Either Mr. Petrie or Mr. Hartman decides whether it goes to the store or the warehouse and signs it."

"And these delivery notices—you keep copies?"

"I have a file."

"Excellent. I'll want to see it. And I'm not going to bring up the fact that something is missing right away, so please don't say anything. Now if you'll call the salesmen we can get started."

Mr. Petrie and Roger both seem stunned when they meet Ms. Waters. She wants them to go somewhere with enough room for everyone, including Beth, who will take notes. Mr. Petrie says his office will be fine, but there turns out not to be enough room and, besides, Roger wants them to use his office.

"Gentlemen, please!" Ms. Waters says impatiently as the argument intensifies. "I'll sit on that couch. You three pull your chairs out here."

When they are seated, Mr. Petrie points to the ceiling and says, "Before we get started, Miss Waters, please allow me, as the senior salesman in the Tulsa office, to express on behalf of everyone here our delight at having a visitor from headquarters."

"Does everybody here talk slow?" Ms. Waters asks. "I'd like to know what arrangements have been made for the trade show."

Mr. Petrie points to the ceiling and clears his throat. He tries to talk more rapidly than usual and bumps words into one another. "We've arranged for a wonderful display, with photos of sishing fenes—I mean fishing scenes—on the rear wall, I mean panel. There aren't any walls in those booths, are there?" He laughs.

Roger, who doesn't have to pretend to talk rapidly, attacks. "We got two hundred square feet on a corner in the main hall. That's fifty more than last year, and the location cost more. But I did a study and figured out that for ten percent more rent we'll get at least a twenty-five percent increase in walk-bys. With a corner booth you always get ten percent more serious stops, but I don't have to tell you that."

Ms. Waters nods and listens intently as Roger describes traffic flows, sales volumes, and follow-ups from the last five trade shows.

"In summary," he says, "I believe we've positioned ourselves to make maximum impact for our new product line, although we can't do any more booth design until we've seen the equipment."

"Indeed," says Ms. Waters. "I see that it's about lunchtime."

"There's a little cafe around the corner," Mr. Petrie says brightly. "They have great homemade pie."

"I made reservations for two at La Maison downtown," Roger purrs. "The wine list isn't bad, and they do quite well with snapper and roughy."

"Since you made reservations," Ms. Waters says. Turning to Beth and Mr. Petrie, she adds, "We'll meet back here at, say, two o'clock."

Beth stands and says, "The file you requested, would you care to take it with you?"

"I almost forgot. Thank you, Beth." Ms. Waters puts the file in her briefcase, which she takes with her when she and Roger leave.

Mr. Petrie sighs. "I don't know, Beth. There's something about these young business people. I can't seem to get across to them. Oh well. How about lunch at the cafe?"

"I had an errand to do," she says. "Never mind. Lunch would be nice."

Ms. Waters returns to the office at three o'clock. She is alone.

"Mr. Hartman," she announces after directing Beth to call Mr. Petrie out, "will no longer be employed by International Bass Specialties."

"Goodness," says Beth.

"I didn't know he was looking for another job," says Mr. Petrie.

Ms. Waters helps herself to Beth's visitor's chair. "He wasn't until this afternoon," she says, her voice prickly with corporate triumph.

"Goodness," says Beth again. Mr. Petrie apparently cannot speak.

Ms. Waters tosses back her head and sighs. "Mr. Hartman intercepted a special shipment of demonstrator fishing reels. I couldn't get him to admit it, but I'm certain he intended to sell the designs to our competitors, maybe even help them sabotage our marketing push at the trade show. That must be why he had the exhibit specifications so well worked out."

"Gosh," says Mr. Petrie. "I had no idea."

"You, of course, know the shipment I'm referring to, Mr. Petrie?"

"Yes. Yes, of course. Very hush-hush. Yes."

"Weren't you curious about why it hadn't shown up?"

"Well, yes. In fact, I was conducting my own inquiry but, you know, with all the secrecy there wasn't much . . ."

Beth interrupts before he can do himself any harm. "I'm shocked. Perhaps we should call the police."

"Why does everybody want to call the police? We found the shipment. Hartman's gone."

"What he did would be against the law," Beth says.

"Worse than that. What he did almost blew three million dollars' worth of marketing out the door. Let's keep it away from the police and out of the papers."

"I never thought of that," Beth says.

"Very clever," Mr. Petrie says. "Where did Roger have the demonstrator reels?"

Ms. Waters grins wickedly. "In an apartment. A fully equipped apartment, if you know what I mean."

"Gosh," says Mr. Petrie, insight striking with uncharacteristic speed. "A woman?"

"She had the shipment boxes open and the demonstrator reels out on tables for anyone to see."

Mr. Petrie looks puzzled. "You mean Charlotte, his wife. A big woman, not fat exactly, but, you know, big."

Ms. Waters laughs. "Wrong. A small, lithe thing. I think I heard him call her Barbara. He tried to make me believe she was his niece. In fact, he acted like a little boy when I gave him the address after lunch and asked him to drive me there."

"What will Charlotte think?" Mr. Petrie asks.

"I think Hartman will be busy trying to keep the truth from her for a while, don't you?" Ms. Waters says, laughing again. "That's why I don't think any of us will be hearing from him again. Now that I've gotten to the bottom of that, I'll try to catch an earlier flight out."

"You mean you won't be staying for the trade show?" Mr. Petrie asks.

"And have to hang around and talk fishing with a bunch of retailers from the sticks? Thanks, no."

"One more thing," Mr. Petrie begins.

Beth interrupts. "Ms. Waters should hurry, sir. The afternoon flights fill up fast."

Mr. Petrie persists. "How did you know where to have Roger drive you?"

"Simple detective work," Ms. Waters says. "I checked the delivery notice for the special order, saw the address and who signed it, and knew I had my man. All I could hope after that was that he hadn't handed the equipment over to our competitors yet. I'm glad you reminded me. I need to return the file to Beth." She opens

her briefcase, then looks at Beth suspiciously.

Mr. Petrie, shaking his head, walks into his office.

After his door shuts, Ms. Waters says, "It occurs to me, Beth, that this might have been set up."

"I wouldn't know, Ms. Waters."

"Think about it. Somebody who knew the procedures and could forge Hartman's signature, maybe get him to sign something without reading it."

"Of course, someone would have to know about the apartment in order to do that, I suppose." Beth looks straight into the eyes of Pat Waters, who isn't at all fooled.

"Did you set all this up, Beth?"

"That would seem illegal."

"Did you set it up?"

"Let me see," Beth says, touching her chin. "The demonstrator reels are safe, Roger Hartman is gone, and you, I presume, will have a promotion. It seems to me that if one were worried only about the way things turn out, things turned out quite well for most of us."

"Yes," says Ms. Waters, chuckling. "I guess they did. Especially considering you aren't going to tell me what I want to know, and now I'm not sure I want to know it anyway."

"There is one thing that might have turned out better," Beth says.

"Oh?"

"Mr. Petrie no doubt will have to handle the whole territory by himself."

"Yes, God help us. I doubt seriously the company will want to spend the money to replace Hartman. I don't think he'll do too much harm. He seems to have good help."

"Perhaps," Beth says, "he would do better with a more authoritative title. Something, for example, like regional manager."

SOLUTION TO THE OCTOBER "UNSOLVED":

"Chris kissed Cross but Cross crossed Chris so Chris's kris criss-crossed Cross; now krised Cross's crossing kisses caress Chris no more."

A kris is a wavy-bladed Indonesian dagger. The word kris can also be used as a verb.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Business and Desires

by Stacy Aumonier

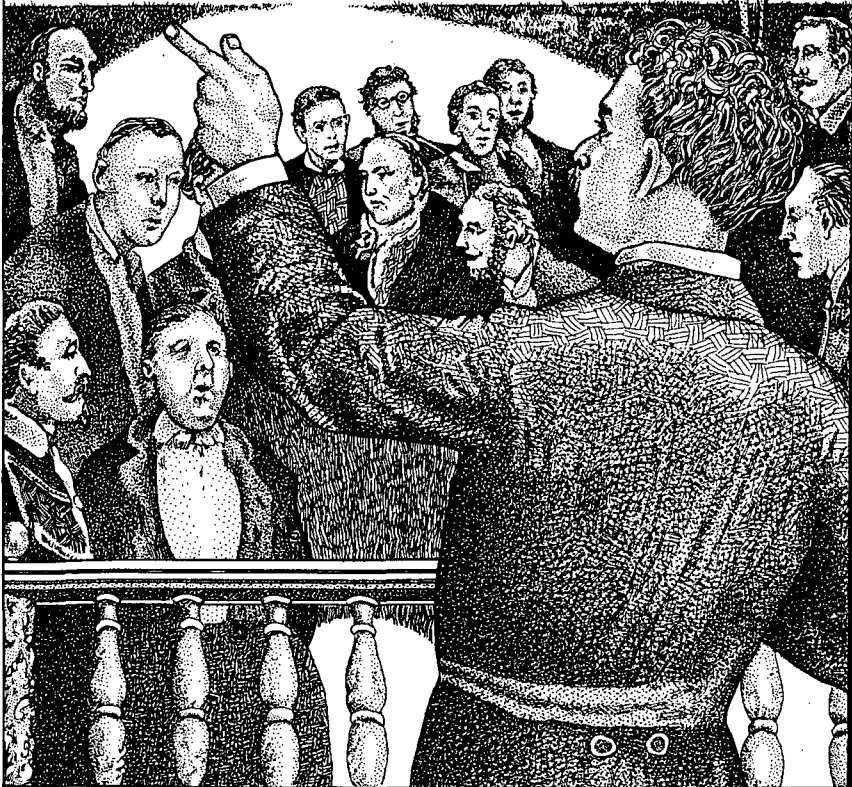


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

Frederick James Smith stretched himself luxuriously in front of the fire of King Cup Villa. His rather lordly attitude appeared justified, as indeed it was. It may have been a little accentuated on this evening, because he had been informed that day that his salary in future was to be five pounds a week instead of three pounds fifteen—a well-merited recognition of his seven years' service to Messrs. Bole and Binspit, the famous West End firm of furnishers and upholsterers.

From the little kitchen at the back came the sound of his wife's voice humming an Indian love lyric as she washed up the sardine plates from their supper. Through the thin walls he could hear a pianola in the adjoining villa. Frederick James lighted a cigarette, and glanced at a copy of the *Evening News*, but he was too happy to read. Getting on. He enjoyed fleet glimpses of more and more getting on—infinite possibilities. They said that old Pagson, the head salesman, was making over a thousand a year. Mr. Binspit himself lived in Grosvenor Court, and had another house at Maidenhead. It only wanted a bit of luck here and there. A romantic and interesting life—a furniture salesman's.

His wife entered the room with a handful of knives and forks, which she deposited in the plate basket on the sideboard. He watched her sorting them out and putting them in the different compartments as she continued to hum "Pale Hands, I Loved." Remarkable things, women. The vision of her quickened his sense of proprietorship. Here was Gladys: wife, mother of his child, running the little villa, doing the housework and the cooking, cleaning, and mending, nursing the baby, doing the shopping, keeping the accounts, and yet in the evening looking smart and sweet, even humming passionate music. Whatever her duties, she always kept a little corner for romance. And she was his, intensely and ultimately his—the thing he owned more completely than anything in the world. The instant she had adjusted the silver she darted upstairs to peep at the baby. When she returned she was no longer singing; she carried a basket full of socks, which she put down and began to examine. The master of the house spoke.

"I tell you what, old girl, we might go to the pictures tomorrow evening."

The wife and mother thoughtfully threaded a darning needle.

"Um. We might. If I can get Bessie to come in for a couple of hours. We mustn't be late, though."

"No."

Frederick James sat down and toyed with the poker.

"They're fairly letting that pianola go tonight, aren't they?"

"Yes. That's rather a pretty piece, isn't it?"

"Um."

They sat in silence for some time listening. Then Gladys said:

"Been busy today?"

The eyes of the businessman lighted up.

"I should think we have! Rush, rush, rush, all day. Getting out specifications for that Tilgate job. Chap must have pots of money, having a black and white marble hall, and a walnut billiard room. Some blokes do have luck."

"Don't you grumble, old thing. You're doing all right."

"I'm not grumbling. I'm only saying. I like it. There's lots of romance in the furnishing trade. You'd be surprised. Things happening all day. Rich people and that. You see into their lives. You'd be surprised the things you see. I suppose, except for doctors, no one sees so much of the inner life of the rich as the furnisher. And it's rush, rush, all the time. I get to that state when nothing surprises me. The things we see! The only rule I make is I never ask no questions. Whatever I see in folks' houses, I say nothing. It's not my business."

He lighted another cigarette and took up the newspaper. The little cosy intimacy had helped to soothe him. He read out odd paragraphs of interest to Gladys. Then he wrote a letter to a firm of ironmongers, expressing the opinion that their estimate for repairing a sewing machine was "excessive." He went out and posted it, and bought a packet of cigarettes. Then he came in and locked up the cat in the scullery. Gladys tidied up and turned out the gas. At a quarter past ten they were in bed.

At eight o'clock next morning they breakfasted, and at twenty-five minutes past he kissed his wife, and said:

"Well, what about the pictures tonight, dear?"

She brushed the rim of his coat collar, and replied:

"Yes. All right. Where shall I meet you?"

"What do you say to that A.B.C. in the Strand?"

"All right."

"Righto, then. Be there at six o'clock and we'll have a couple of poached eggs on toast or a Cambridge sausage, and then we can go to one of those picture shows near Cranbourn Street."

"Right you are, dear. Don't be late."

He walked to the corner and caught his bus, and had the good fortune to secure a strap. At four minutes to nine he was at his desk. He had put his umbrella in the corner, and was about to

remove his overcoat when one of the porters came up and said: "Mr. Smith, Mr. Binspit wants to see you in his office the moment you arrive."

"Oh!"

What was this all about? A sudden misgiving came over him that there had been a mistake about his increase. Or was he to be put up into an even more exalted position? He stared vacantly at the papers on his desk, then he walked quickly through to the Holy of Holies, and tapped on the door.

Mr. Binspit's secretary was binding up some drawings. He glanced at Frederick James, and said:

"Here is Smith, sir."

"Come in, Smith."

The head of the firm stood up. He was a tall, imperturbable, elderly man with polished manners and a beautifully tonsured beard. He remarked:

"Let's see, what are you doing, Smith?"

"I'm on the Tilgate job, sir."

"You must leave it. I want you to come with me. Get your order book, and meet me down at the front door in five minutes' time."

"Yes, sir."

In four and a half minutes' time Smith was standing by the front door like a sentry on duty. Mr. Binspit did not keep him waiting. He came through in the impressive manner that had been one of the assets of his career. He ignored Frederick James and walked straight through onto the pavement. His car was waiting. He pointed to a seat.

"Get in."

The car glided up Oxford Street. The chief twirled his mustache. As they were passing Hyde Park he condescended to remark:

"We are going to Richmond. A new client, Mr. Marshall Flaxton—American. Appears to be in a great hurry. I don't know what the job is. You may have to stay there all day."

That's all right, as long as I get to the A.B.C. in the Strand at six o'clock in time to meet the missus, thought Frederick, but he only said:

"Yes, sir."

The run to Richmond lasted less than half an hour. The car entered the park and took a side road in the direction of Kew. Suddenly it entered a drive between long beds of rhododendrons in full bloom and came to a halt before the portico of a large Queen Anne house. The front door was open, and a man, who had appar-

ently been expecting them, stepped forward and nodded. He was a small, oldish man with cracked parchments skin and keen brown eyes. He said:

"Bole and Binspit?"

Mr. Binspit bowed. "I am Mr. Binspit. This is one of my junior salesmen."

Mr. Marshall Flaxton glanced at them both, and to Frederick's surprise he felt that he himself was the object of the greater interest.

"Come right in."

They walked across the hall. The house was apparently empty and unoccupied, but Mr. Flaxton called up the staircase:

"Ella! They've come!"

There was the sound of hurrying footsteps on the bare boards, and almost immediately a stoutish old lady came hurrying downstairs. She appeared flurried and out of breath. She ejaculated:

"Morning!" and put her hand to her heart. Frederick was equally aware when she glanced at him that there was something about his appearance which occasioned surprise.

Mr. and Mrs. Flaxton exchanged glances, then he turned briskly to Mr. Binspit and said:

"Now, if you don't mind, I'll do the talking. Time presses."

There was a series of reception rooms connected by folding doors. Mr. Flaxton turned to Frederick and said:

"Shorthand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get out notebook. Room one: Hepplewhite drawing room suite, two Chinese lacquer cabinets, Turkey carpet, felt surround—got that? Right! Two majolica vases for overmantel. Heavy brocade curtains in style, three full-length portraits, Georgian period, gilt Italian coffer—got that? Right! Come on. Room two."

Before Mr. Flaxton had reached room five the eyes of the imperturbable Mr. Binspit were starting out of his head. Frederick was unmoved. He went on calmly entering the instructions in his notebook. Mrs. Flaxton trotted along in the rear like a faithful sheepdog.

The man must be mad, thought Binspit. But the reputation of Marshall Flaxton, the nitrate and potash king, was good enough to justify a little insanity. At room five a french window opened onto a conservatory. Mr. Flaxton said to Frederick:

"Go in there and roughly estimate cubic dimensions."

Frederick James stepped through, and then, as he stood on the

other side, owing to the echo of the empty rooms, he overheard a remark not intended for his ears. He heard Mr. Flaxton say:

"Is this the kind of fellow who can mind his own business?"

And he heard Mr. Binspit answer:

"I chose him for that purpose. I think he is the kind of man you asked for."

They went over the whole house. There was to be no painting nor decorating, no arrangements for lighting, nothing done to the kitchen; but the house was to be filled with costly furniture, carpets, curtains, pictures, and bric-a-brac. When the party eventually arrived back in the hall, Mr. Binspit cleared his throat, and said in his best manager-directing voice:

"Well, Mr. Flaxton, I think your wishes are quite clear. We can let you have a specification and estimate in the course of a week or so."

Mr. Flaxton took out his watch.

"It's five minutes of ten," he muttered, as if to himself, then, tapping the other on the forearm, he exclaimed: "I didn't ask you for a specification or an estimate! It's five minutes of ten! I want the job done by three o'clock today!"

"Er—excuse me, do I understand—"

"I want the job done by three o'clock today."

"I'm afraid it's quite impossible."

"How many men do you employ?"

"Oh, several thousand altogether—scattered about."

"You can call them off other jobs."

"I'm afraid the cost would be—"

"I didn't ask about the cost. Aren't there automobiles and motor lorries? Aren't there telephones? Haven't you any stock? Is London bereft of old furniture? Is your firm bereft of enterprise? I repeat—I didn't ask about the cost."

The pupils of Mr. Binspit's eyes seemed to narrow to a pinpoint. He looked like a terrier watching the approach of a rabbit, and yet not quite convinced that it really was a rabbit. He fidgeted with his handsome beard, and took several paces up and down the hall. In the meantime Mr. Flaxton jerked out:

"Section it out. Fifteen salesmen—each responsible for a room. Order fleet of motor lorries to be ready by twelve o'clock. Have fifty men waiting here for them. So many detailed to each room. Holy Moses! there's nothing to do but put the furniture in its place."

"But the carpets, the curtains," wailed Mr. Binspit despairingly.

"Excuse me, sir," suddenly remarked Frederick James quietly.

"There are those brocade curtains which are now ready for Lord Gastwyck St. James. I believe they would be just the size for these rooms."

"Bright lad!" chirped Mr. Flaxton.

"But Lord Gastwyck was in yesterday. He was complaining—"

"To hell with the lord! I'll pay you three times what he's paying."

Frederick James again spoke:

"Excuse me, sir, but if Mr. Flaxton could have the surrounds stained instead of laying down a felt it could be done quickly, and with that stain we use now it dries in half an hour. In that case there would be no difficulty, if those curtains fit."

"Good! that's right, boy. Telephone at once for forty French polishers to come down in taxicabs. There's a telephone in that little room by the lavatory."

Mr. Binspit eventually found himself caught up in the whirl of his client's enthusiasms. He telephoned for nearly a hundred workmen to come down at once in taxicabs. He gave instructions that no one was to leave the premises of Bole and Binspit, and that all salesmen and workmen on outside jobs were to report instantly. Then he took Frederick's shorthand notes and went off in his car, leaving Frederick to act as a kind of foreman.

When his chief had gone, Frederick wandered through the rooms planning the campaign. He left Mr. and Mrs. Flaxton whispering together in the hall. He had not been left to his own devices for ten minutes before a car drove up to the door, and there was a violent ringing of the bell. He walked through into the hall, feeling that it was perhaps his place to open the door, but Mr. Flaxton had forestalled him. He observed a young, fair, and pretty girl in a great fluster of excitement. The first words she uttered were:

"Well, Pop, nothing been heard of the count?"

"Not a sign."

"Who the ——"

Frederick was conscious of being scrutinized by a pair of deep grey startled eyes. Mr. Flaxton glanced abruptly over his shoulder and ejaculated:

"The upholsterer's man. They've promised to make good by three o'clock."

"Fine! But, say, did you ever—"

As Frederick withdrew to the inner room he distinctly caught the phrase: "Most extraordinary resemblance."

It was not his business to take an excessive interest in his client's affairs and conversations, and he was just measuring the width of

the bay in the second drawing room when he saw another car drive up and three Chinamen get out. One was gorgeously appareled, obviously a potentate of some sort, accompanied by two secretaries. They rang the bell, and he heard Mr. Flaxton admit them.

"Sixteen feet three inches by five feet four and a half," murmured Frederick, making a note in his book. Then he looked up and found Mrs. Flaxton standing at his elbow. She appeared agitated. She beckoned him to accompany her into the further room. When they arrived there, she whispered:

"Hide your notebook, Mr.—er—"

"Smith, madam."

"Mr. Smith, do not be alarmed about anything. You shall be well recompensed for any inconvenience. Something unexpected has happened. There is no time to enter into details; but for certain purposes, which are very urgent—very pressing—we may wish to pass you off as someone you are not. Quite temporarily, you understand."

"Yes, madam."

"Thank you very much. Hallo! what's this?"

A line of taxis began to stream up the drive. It was the vanguard of the army of French polishers and workmen.

"My! we must keep this bunch out for a bit. Mr. Smith, please run and tell them to wait on the tennis court. Tell them we're not quite ready for them. But—in the meantime, wait till I have got his excellency out of the way. I won't be two minutes."

"Yes, madam."

The bell began to ring, but Frederick waited discreetly for three or four minutes; then he went out and faced a small crowd of men with carpet bags in the porch.

"I say, you fellows," he said, "the gov'nor's not quite ready yet. He says will you hang around over by that tennis court? Watkins, will you stay here and tell the others as they come up?"

As he closed the door he heard the men lighting their pipes and shuffling up. He turned round. Mrs. Flaxton was waiting for him.

"Come," she said.

He followed her upstairs. His excellency—whoever he was—was seated on a packing case fanning himself, and all the rest were standing around in respectful attitudes. Mrs. Flaxton took his arm and led him up to the group. Then, bowing very low, she said:

"Your excellency, this is Antonio, the son of Count Androssi."

One of the secretaries interpreted the introduction. His excellency bowed to Frederick. Frederick, who felt it his duty to live up

to his instructions, bowed low in response. There was a whispered confabulation in Chinese; then the interpreter said:

"His excellency would be glad to have an assurance from Signor Antonio Androssi that he formally waives his claim."

Mr. Flaxton turned and gripped Frederick's forearm, in the meantime giving him a comprehensive glance.

"Of course he does. On the contrary, Signor Antonio is now my daughter's fiancé. Isn't that so?"

"That's right," said Frederick.

"His excellency would be glad to have the assurance in writing."

"Of course, of course!"

A sheet of foolscap was produced, and Mr. Flaxton wrote down the following:

"I, Antonio Bruno Androssi, of Vallimbrossa, do hereby formally waive my claim to the hand of Rhoda Mallesta, and to all rights in the island kingdom of Paray. Signed . . ."

"Here you are, my son," said Mr. Flaxton, handing Frederick the document and a fountain pen.

Frederick balanced the paper on a window sill and copied the name "Antonio Bruno Androssi." Mr. Flaxton and one of the Chinamen witnessed the signature, and it was handed to his excellency, who immediately concealed it in some mysterious crevice in his apparel, bowed, and spoke again.

"His excellency wishes the two young people the joy of the twenty-seven nights of The White Flamingo."

Frederick muttered quietly, "Thanks awfully," and bowed again. Then the Chinese contingent took their departure. As they were going out of the hall Mrs. Flaxton whispered to Frederick:

"Oh, Mr. Smith, thank you so much. You've been splendid."

"That's all right, madam. Now; what about these carpets?"

"Just two minutes."

By this time the park was beginning to assume the character of a military dump. Motor vans were drawn up in line. Taxis were standing two deep by the outside rails. Workmen were lying about in luxurious attitudes among the flower beds. When the car with the Chinamen had departed, Frederick was instructed to call the men in and impress them with the urgency of the work. Half an hour later Mr. Binspit returned. The curtains of Lord Gastwyck St. James happened to fit admirably. The house resounded with the blows of hammers and the swish of brushes and the groan of heavy furniture being carried hither and thither. A dozen men were detailed for each room. At first there seemed to be no dis-

position to hurry at all. The British workman deeply resents any attempt at speeding-up. The popular commentary was:

"What's this blinking job all about, anyway?"

Then Mr. Flaxton rushed around and announced that there would be a bonus of sixty pounds to be divided among the twelve men whose room was finished first. This considerably accelerated matters. By half-past one the carpets were laid, the staining was done, the curtains were up, and the furniture was being rushed in at a dangerous speed. Frederick James walked hither and thither, saying quietly:

"Righto! Steady! Steady!"

The Flaxton family went off in their car to get lunch at a hotel in Richmond. And Mr. Binspit did the same. Frederick James was too occupied to think about food.

"Steady! Steady! That's right. Room seven."

At five minutes to two, four dark, foreign-looking men appeared. They pushed their way through the throng. Frederick again observed that he was an object of someone else's keen interest. He was, however, too preoccupied to pay the foreigners much attention. Probably they were friends of Mr. Flaxton's.

After regarding him furtively they went off to a corner to whisper together. Frederick James was extremely busy. He was standing by the top of the staircase leading to the basement when one of these men touched him on the shoulder and whispered:

"It is very, very important. Will you come down to the basement for one second?"

Frederick James looked annoyed, but he followed the man downstairs. The basement was deserted. They had no instructions to supply anything for it. There was a series of rambling stone corridors and kitchens and wash-houses leading to a yard at the back, where there were stables and garages and a kitchen garden.

He followed the men for twenty yards or so down the corridor, when suddenly someone sprang out from some break in the wall and gripped him from behind. A cloth saturated with some pungent liquid was whipped across his face. He was gagged and pinioned. He felt himself being carried, and he knew that he was losing consciousness. The last thing that he remembered was being on a comfortable spring-seat and hearing the sudden whirr of a self-starter in a car.

They'll never get the job done without me, he thought, and then he swam away into some dark void.

The next thing he was acutely aware of was that the spring-seat

had become unaccountably hard. It was swaying slightly, too—not at all the motion of a car. There was a gentle lapping sound quite near his head. He could hear the rumble of voices, but he could not hear what was said. Then a face appeared through a trap door above him, an old, battered, gnarled face that might be flesh and blood or might be beaten copper. The jaws were moving with the slow circular movements of the tobacco-chewer. One eye surveyed him; the other seemed to be looking over the owner's shoulder. The voice said:

"Hallo, dago. Parly Italiano, huh?"

Frederick James eagerly sucked in the draft of fresh air. Then he called out:

"I say, what's the game?"

The face above turned sideways and addressed some unseen person.

"The blighter's awake. He talks English."

Another face appeared, a younger one, with a black beard and a deep scar on the left jaw. It must have been a very small boat, and it was apparently not moving. Frederick James repeated:

"What's the game, you chaps?"

The swivel-eyed man replied:

"The game's all right, my lad. We're waiting for the gov'nor's orders to get way on."

"Where are we going?"

The two faces continued chewing, and the blackbearded man expectorated over the edge of the boat. They were apparently not unfriendly, only somewhat callous, and utterly bored with having to hang about. The swivel-eyed man regarded him thoughtfully, then withdrew. Then the head of the blackbearded man appeared.

"Where are we going?" again asked Frederick.

The blackbearded man studied him for several minutes but said nothing. He also withdrew, and Frederick heard them talking together above.

It's a bit thick, thought the junior furniture salesman. One has to do things to oblige a client, but—reely!

His arms and legs were pinioned, and the plank was very hard. He had had nothing to eat or drink since breakfast, but what he felt most in need of was—information. As quietly as he could he sat up on his haunches, then rolled over and got onto his knees. They had left the hatch open, and he strained his neck at an uncomfortable angle trying to get his ear to the opening without

showing his head. At first he could not catch what was said; then he distinctly heard Swivel-Eye say:

"When you've been with the guv'nor as long as I 'ave, mate, you won't ask too many questions."

There was a silence; then the blackbearded man remarked:

"Well, I'll bet yer a thousand quid to a quartern of unsweetened that this bloke isn't a dago at all."

There was another pause, and then the other answered:

"All I can say is, if 'e ain't there'll be the devil to pay when the guv'nor turns up."

"What d'you think's the game this time?"

"I know nothin'. All I know is we pick up the *Zephyr* tonight, after sundown, when she's cleared port, and we stow away these barrels of what they call potash, and what other folks call dope, and we tumble the lot, including this guy, into the hold, and then clear. Them was the guv'nor's instructions."

"Where's it for?"

"Cape Horn. Pacific route to some blinkin' little port in the Malay Straits. They won't make it for two months, if then."

A terrible temptation came over Frederick James to thrust his head through the opening and exclaim:

"Look here, that's a bit thick! I can't go out to the Malay Straits. I've got to meet the missus at six o'clock at an A.B.C."

But he restrained himself. The need for caution and information was very great. The blackbearded man was laughing:

"The guv'nor won't half be pleased if he finds out in two months' time that they've got the wrong guy. Lumme! what a game! What's at the back of it all, Pete?"

"Bizness."

"Bizness! 'Ow d'you mean—bizness?"

"Bizness is at the back of most things. Look 'ere, 'ere's a guess. Mind you, I know nothin', nothin' at all, see?"

"I ain't a blabber."

"Supposin' yer take two groups of what they call interests grabbin' on the same claim. This potash-dope line, d'yer see? The Androssis and the guv'nor on one side, and this 'ere American and the Barocchis on the other. It's known that the big bug on the whole scheme is this Chink—what's 'is name?—Ah Seng Tse. He 'ands round the concessions and that. See? But 'e wants to keep a grip on the place 'isself. This island where they make the 'ead-quarters, you know—Paray, isn't it? The Androssis want to butt

in, and the chance comes to work his blitherin' son of a goat off on the woman who's practically the queen of the island. See? But the young count is a bad boy. 'E's off somewhere chasing some fairy from a chrous. The American sees 'is chance and cuts in. Blows the gaff on 'em all. Cuts Androssi out, announces 'e's marryin' 'is daughter—anythin' just to quieten the Chink, throw sand in 'is eyes. Cuts in with a new claim for concessions. The Androssis are in Paris huntin' up the son and heir. But someone gets wind of it. Some of his gang cop the lad, smuggle 'im off, and there 'e is—bound for 'is blinkin' island kingdom and 'is bloomin' princess. Mind yer, I know nothin', nothin' at all."

Frederick James thrust his head boldly through the opening, and said:

"I say, you chaps, I've had no dinner. Is there any chance of getting a cup of tea?"

"Well, I'm damned!" remarked Swivel-Eye; then he nodded and said:

"Certainly, my lord. 'Orace, put the kettle on the lamp, and make 'is lordship a cup of tea."

To Frederick's surprise "'Orace" did as he was bidden. The two seamen grinned, and Swivel-Eye muttered:

"You're a rum 'un, you are. Better lie down and not show yer 'ead above deck."

"But, look here, can't you chaps let me go? It don't matter to you, does it?"

"When you see the guv'nor, you'll know why we can't let you go. What do you say yer name is?"

"Frederick James Smith. I'm an assistant salesman to Messrs. Bole and Binspit."

"Sounds familiar. Better keep yer yarn ready to tell the guv'nor."

"Where are we?"

"We're lying up—waiting the guv'nor's orders." It seemed hopeless to try to get any more information out of his captors. He waited patiently. In a few minutes the man with the black beard handed him down a cup of tea. His wrists were tied, but his hands were sufficiently free to grip the cup. When he had drunk it the black-bearded man actually handed him a cigarette and lighted it, at the same time adding:

"Mind you put that out when the guv'nor comes. 'E don't like smoking in the state room. Yer might spoil the plush carpets."

Frederick thanked him, and smoked in silence.

Barely ten minutes elapsed before there was a sound of oars

rattling in rowlocks, and the lapping increased in violence. One of the men called down to him:

"'E's comin'. Pull yerself together."

When the face of the "guv'nor" appeared above the hatch Frederick instantly realized the force of Swivel-Eye's remark as to not letting him go. It was an enormous, puffy face, with protruding teeth, a square jaw, and deep malevolent eyes. A voice said:

"Sit up, please."

Frederick James did as he was told. The other glanced at him, and then his face changed color. The center of his face seemed to go white and the outside rim of it scarlet. And then the voice rang out. Frederick James had always contended that for foul language and profanity the furnishing trade was not to be beaten, but in the brief minute that followed he realized that his colleagues were merely amateurs at the game. He had never heard such a rich, fruitful, and varied vocabulary. The anger was not expended on Frederick himself, or even on the two seamen, but on some unfortunate individual named Shale. The boat rocked with the violence of his anger and elocation. He drew back and growled at the others. Frederick reared himself up to listen. He heard Swivel-Eye say something, and then the thunder of the guv'nor's voice:

"I don't want him blabbing. Better cut his throat and throw him in the river."

The wretched victim was left guessing as to the outcome of this command as the three of them drew away to the stern of the boat and whispered.

It's a bit thick, thought Frederick. The discussion seemed to go on for an eternity. At length the face of the guv'nor appeared again, and an enormous hand came down and gripped him by the hair.

"Look here—you, you little bone-headed sewer rat. I'm sending you back. But not a word of this ever—see?—not to—no one. It's no good your giving me your word of honor, because that wouldn't cut any ice at all. But if ever it comes out that you've blabbed a word, I'll come for you from the ends of the earth. I'll put my foot in the small of your back and break you clean in half. Savvy?"

"All right, sir. Thank you very much."

The guv'nor withdrew, and the blackbearded man came down and released him. In less than five minutes he was on a dinghy, being rowed in the direction of a group of deserted buildings. The blackbearded man rowed, and the guv'nor accompanied him. They landed and walked through two long empty warehouses. At the end of the farther one was a yard, where they found a large car

and a chauffeur. Frederick was told to get inside, and the guv'nor spoke to the chauffeur. To his relief he found that he was to go unaccompanied. Just as they were starting the guv'nor put his head in the door and said:

"You'll bear in mind what I said."

And the expression on his face was a thing that Frederick James would be likely to bear in mind all his life.

The car glided off and turned westwards. The pace increased as they reached the high road. They passed through a busy, rather dirty town, which Frederick guessed to be Gravesend. They were in the outskirts of London in less than half an hour. It was exactly twenty-five minutes to six when they pulled up at the corner of Oxford Street. The chauffeur came around and opened the door.

"You get out here," he said.

Frederick did not require any encouragement. He hesitated whether he ought to offer the chauffeur a tip, but decided that if he did he could not give him less than two shillings, and that disbursement might make him short for the evening's entertainment, so he merely nodded and said:

"Good afternoon, sir. Thank you very much."

He walked round the corner and entered the premises of Messrs. Bole and Binspit. Everything seemed to be going on as usual. He walked through to Mr. Binspit's office and met that gentleman coming out. He was apparently in a genial mood. He exclaimed:

"Hallo, Smith. Are you better?"

"I'm all right, sir."

"Someone told me that you had fainted and had gone home in a cab."

Frederick equivocated.

"I'm better now, sir."

"A queer affair, that Richmond job. We got it done practically to time. Then the client didn't want it after all. It seems that someone who was expected didn't turn up, or came too soon, or something. He settled up, though—every penny."

"Oh!"

"Good night. You had better get on to that Tilgate job tomorrow."

At five minutes past six Frederick found Gladys seated at their usual table in the A.B.C. in the Strand.

"I'm sorry I'm late," he said.

"It's all right. Been busy, dear?"

"Oh, yes. The usual thing: rush, rush, rush, all day. What are you going to have? Poached eggs or Cambridge sausage?"

"Cambridge sausage, I think."

"Righto. Pot of tea for two, and two Cambridge sausages, please, miss."

They ate their high tea in silence, finishing up with jam and buns.

"Milly called this afternoon," remarked Gladys. "She says Fanny Stone—you know that redhaired girl you didn't like, used to giggle—she's got engaged to a feller in the City with pots of money."

"Reely?"

After a mature interval Frederick James Smith indulged in further commentary.

"It's a rum thing—money and business. A chap was saying today business is at the back of all troubles, trying to get on and that. The things people do for money! You'd be surprised. Look at our line. I don't suppose anyone, 'cept p'r'aps doctors, sees so much of the inner life of the rich as we do in the furnishing trade. The things we see! The way some of these rich folks go on. You'd never believe it. Of course, I never ask no questions. A client's private business is none of mine. P'r'aps that's why I'm getting on a bit. But it's rush, rush, rush, all the time."

Frederick paid the bill, and they walked out.

"Why, only today, you'd never believe what I've had to do."

"What have you been doing today?"

"Oh, it's just been one big rush. And I—I've waived a kingdom, and refused the hand of a princess; got engaged to an American millionaire's daughter; been kidnapped; was nearly sent to China; was threatened with having my throat cut—all in my spare time, like. You'd never believe it."

"No, I certainly shouldn't!" Gladys screwed up her eyes. "You're a funny old thing! Why, look! Charlie Chaplin's on at that one."

"Charlie Chaplin!" replied Frederick. "Oh, we get enough Charlie Chaplin in our business. I'd rather see something romantic. What about that one over there, *Love? or a Kingdom?* featuring Pauline Passionella?"

"All right, dear. Whichever you like."

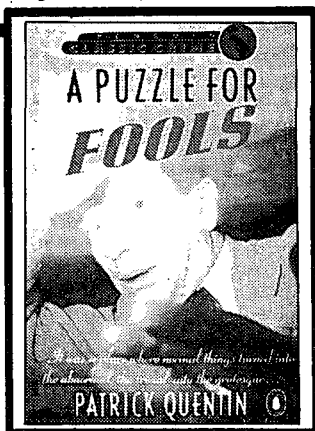
As they walked towards the ticket office, Frederick whispered:

"*Love? or a Kingdom?* What do you think?"

She gave his arm a gentle pressure, and they passed through.

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Patrick Quentin, author of a series of novels featuring Peter Duluth, is the pseudonym for a very successful writing team. Richard Wilson Webb and Hugh Wheeler (who's best known for his subsequent work as a prize-winning Broadway playwright) collaborated for more than fifteen years, authoring the Patrick Quentin tales as well as novels published under the pen name of Q. Patrick.

A *Puzzle for Fools* introduces Peter Duluth who, in this year of 1936, is New York's "youngest theatrical producer" with no small amount of success already behind him. He has also lived the last two years drinking "to an eight-hour-a-day schedule" to escape a tragedy.

When the novel opens, he has spent the last month drying out in a posh sanatorium where he admitted himself in order to take the cure. But the cure isn't taking, and he's off-balance, aggressive, and prone to night terrors—none of which helps his credibility when he tries to tell the hospital staff what he heard one night, after the lights went out: "You've got to get away, Peter Duluth. There will be murder."

Thus Patrick Quentin sets up the framework for Peter Duluth's first investigation, in which Duluth assumes the role of detective solely in defense of his sanity. If you like Gregory McDonald's Fletch, you should find Peter Duluth attractive in the same way. Duluth is worldly

(Above: *A Puzzle for Fools* by Patrick Quentin, reprinted by Penguin.)

wise, quick-thinking, often wryly amused at the behavior of his fellow human beings.

Normality, however, isn't much in evidence at the sanatorium of Dr. Lenze at any time. Duluth wonders what the attraction is, for instance, for the truly beautiful day nurse, who seems so devoted to the men in her charge. And will things ever be right for Iris, the poor little rich girl, whose silence and strange beauty begin to mesmerize Duluth? Quentin exploits the inherent claustrophobia of the institution, whose barred windows and doors help a killer to corner his prey.

Three subsequent Duluth novels, *Puzzle for Players*, *Puzzle for Puppets*, and *Puzzle for Wantons* are currently out of print. The fifth book, *A Puzzle for Fiends*, has been reprinted. It doesn't disappoint either.

Peter Duluth wakes up with his legs in casts and his memory totally gone. He seems to be well provided for; in fact, he's living in wealth, waited on hand and foot by an attractive matron and two lovely young women—his mother, his wife, and his kid sister. Or so they say. But Peter Duluth—who doesn't know he is Peter Duluth, remember—is unconvinced. *A Puzzle for Fiends* becomes a rather scarifying game of Who-do-you-trust? Again, Quentin has created a

great deal of tension by isolating a small number of characters from any external reality. The ending—which one assumes one has guessed up to the last minute—should surprise most readers.

A Puzzle for Pilgrims, originally published in 1948, comes next. As in the other two novels, Peter Duluth is troubled with a personal problem. This time, his wife has moved out to get a divorce so that she can remarry. She has fallen in love with a British writer, a charismatic, gentle man whom Duluth is unable to despise. The novel opens in Mexico City; Duluth has flown down from New York to join his wife—and has stayed on, trying to accept her shocking news. Like the two other books, *A Puzzle for Pilgrims* is a suspenseful drama acted out almost entirely by a very small cast of characters: Duluth and his wife, her lover and his beautiful and strange sister, the man's shrewish and scorned wife—and a macho ringer who follows the group to Veracruz. *A Puzzle for Pilgrims* is a carefully constructed tale of murder and revenge, of love and fidelity, of lust and obsession.

Look for these three novels published as Penguin Crime Classics, and hope for additional Patrick Quentin reissues soon.

MYSTERY REVIEWS

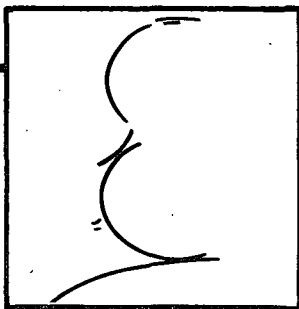
San Francisco is the setting for Julie Smith's **Tourist Trap** (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 230 pp.), the latest novel to star amateur detective and attorney Rebecca Schwartz. The opener is a shocker—a crucified body is discovered on a hilltop that was to be the site of a sunrise Easter service—and it's just the first in a series of killings that seem to be aimed at the Bay City's tourists. The spunky Schwartz is on the scene when the body is discovered, and then finds herself defending the man accused of the murders. That's more than enough to get the natural-born snoop involved in solving the case. There's suspense, plenty of action, some neat courtroom scenes, and a surprising ending, not to mention Rebecca's punchy narrative style. With luck, there'll be many more of these to come.

Linda Barnes has developed a following for her detective Michael Spraggue, a man who has rejected the proffered silver spoon and has persisted in his career as stage actor. Because the latter doesn't always pay enough, Spraggue occasionally returns to a former career as private investigator. In **Cities of the Dead**, however, he has the painful duty of walking out on a lucrative acting job in order to answer a call for help from his Aunt Mary, the wealthy woman who raised him. She is in New Orleans at the request of her longtime live-in cook, a woman who has been accused of using one of her personal cooking knives on her ex-husband. The setting, and the background details about professional chefs and the restaurant business, make this one worth reading. (Fawcett, \$2.95, 198 pp.)

The Quallsford Inheritance by Lloyd Biggle, Jr., can be highly recommended for fans of Sherlock Holmes, for Biggle has added a new tale to the canon. The conceit here is that the manuscript is authored by one Edward Porter Jones, who is a young man at the time of the writing, the summer of 1900. We find him acting as an employed assistant to Sherlock Holmes, a rather natural position for one of the earliest—and the brightest—of the Baker Street Irregulars to assume upon reaching adulthood. Thus Biggle avoids trying to emulate Watson's narrative style, and is free to relate this latest adventure in Porter Jones's own voice. The setting is coastal England. The case opens with a "curious incident" observed by one of the lads who is performing Jones's old job. Biggle has added enough familiar elements and mixed them with a few surprises to deliver a satisfying Holmes tale. (Penguin, \$3.95, 278 pp.)

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The movie mystery has parodied itself almost from the beginning, starting with Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* in 1924. As a matter of fact, this column began with a review of the spoof, *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid*, and has since commended such examples of the form as *Trenchcoat* (1983), *Confidentially Yours* (1984), and *Beverly Hills Cop* (1986).

Dragnet starts out as a send-up of the old TV series (and the 1954 movie of the same name). Dan Aykroyd plays Sergeant Joe Friday's nephew, who works the same Los Angeles beat out of the same office, and from the same desk, twenty years later. Aykroyd sticks to standard procedures just as his uncle did, and of course he keeps saying, "Just the facts please, ma'am."

But he is an absurd figure in his short haircut, blue suit and hat, and his sanctimonious concern for old ladies, children, and the good of the city.

Aykroyd's new partner, Streebeck, played by Tom Hanks, is an 80's swinger whose loose ways disgust Aykroyd. Naturally they grow to respect one another, as each makes his contribution to solving the big case. The joke of Aykroyd's stiff conformity wears thin well before the end, but somehow the movie also makes his character touching.

Aykroyd narrates the story the way the original Joe Friday did, giving the script writers the chance to write the kind of exaggerated officialese that is usually good for a laugh. Aykroyd and Streebeck keep losing cars through theft or collisions,

each time being assigned to something smaller until they end up in a Yugo, which Aykroyd describes as being "on the cutting edge of Serbo-Croatian technology." At the end he reports that the villain has received a string of ninety-nine year sentences, which makes him "eligible for parole in seven years."

We praised the first *Beverly Hills Cop* for sticking close to the business of detection and letting its laughs arise naturally from Eddie Murphy's comic talent. In *Beverly Hills Cop II*, Murphy's Detroit detective,

Axel Foley, returns to Beverly Hills to solve the alphabet robberies, a series of crimes in progress. He comes on the sneak again, and again moves with ease through West Coast high society in his jeans and team jacket.

The formula is unchanged but somehow works less well. Axel teams up again with the two very square Beverly Hills detectives he ran in circles in the first movie. He again does a lilting Caribbean accent to keep his identity from the police higher-ups and does impersonations—of a delivery boy and a building inspector—on the spur of the moment. In these scenes he is still a kind of modern day Huckleberry Finn: an infinitely resourceful comic genius of a liar.

Again, too, Axel is repeatedly said to be in trouble both with the police and the underworld. But the new plot hasn't been taken seriously enough by the film makers for the audience to feel any real tension. Each scene is little more than a set piece of comedy. The criminals seem to have forgotten that they are supposed to be trying to kill Axel, and the film makers have forgotten that the original *Beverly Hills Cop* succeeded as a comedy only because it was a good, solid detective thriller, too.



Dan Aykroyd and Tom Hanks
in *Dragnet*.

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THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The June Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Morgan S. Thompson of Spring Valley, California. Honorable mentions go to Art Cosing of Arlington, Virginia; M. E. Marble of Chicago, Illinois; R. F. Dumas of Apalachicola, Florida; Mary McAlister of Victoria, Texas; J. Robbins of Zelienople, Pennsylvania; Betty Hathaway of Salinas, California; T. V. McArthur of Sanger, California; David Martindale of Houston, Texas; J. N. Merz of Bryan, Texas; and David Pierce of Smyrna, Tennessee.

DOUBLE TROUBLE by Morgan S. Thompson

Reflected sunshine made individual squares of each brick in the small patio. He sat alone, his back to the entrance of the sidewalk cafe. "Waiter, where is my Dos Equis beer?"

A harsh voice from behind: "Freeze, Pepe Lepoopoo, I arrest you for the double murder last Thursday of Fifi and Mimi LaDuce."

Pepe turned, smiled thinly. "Ah, I thought I would soon be hearing from you, Inspector LeOdd. Sorry, mon ami, but last Thursday I was in America visiting friends in Walla Walla and Kokomo."

"Not true, Pepe. We know you stole Madame Tutu's diamonds in Baden-Baden. You gave them to Fifi and Mimi to smuggle to Pago Pago in a box of Johnson and Johnson Band-Aids. They double-crossed you and went instead to Bora Bora. You followed them there but they escaped and fled to Honolulu. You caught up with them again and killed them with a double-barreled shotgun on the beach at Waikiki."

"Proof, inspector, where is your proof?"

"Your fingerprints were found all over a package of Doublemint gum at the scene of the crime."

Pepe wilted. "All right, I admit I did follow those women to Hawaii. But they were also being followed by an African with beriberi. LeOdd, those girls were killed by a Mau Mau wearing a muumuu."

"Still, you must come with me to headquarters. We shall check and double check your story."

LeOdd handcuffed his suspect to the handlebars of a bicycle built for two and they pedaled off together.

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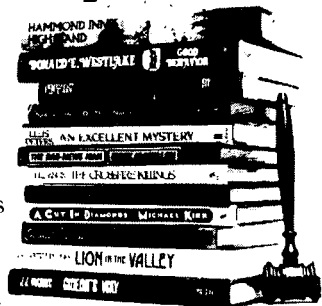
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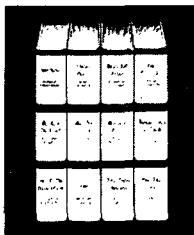
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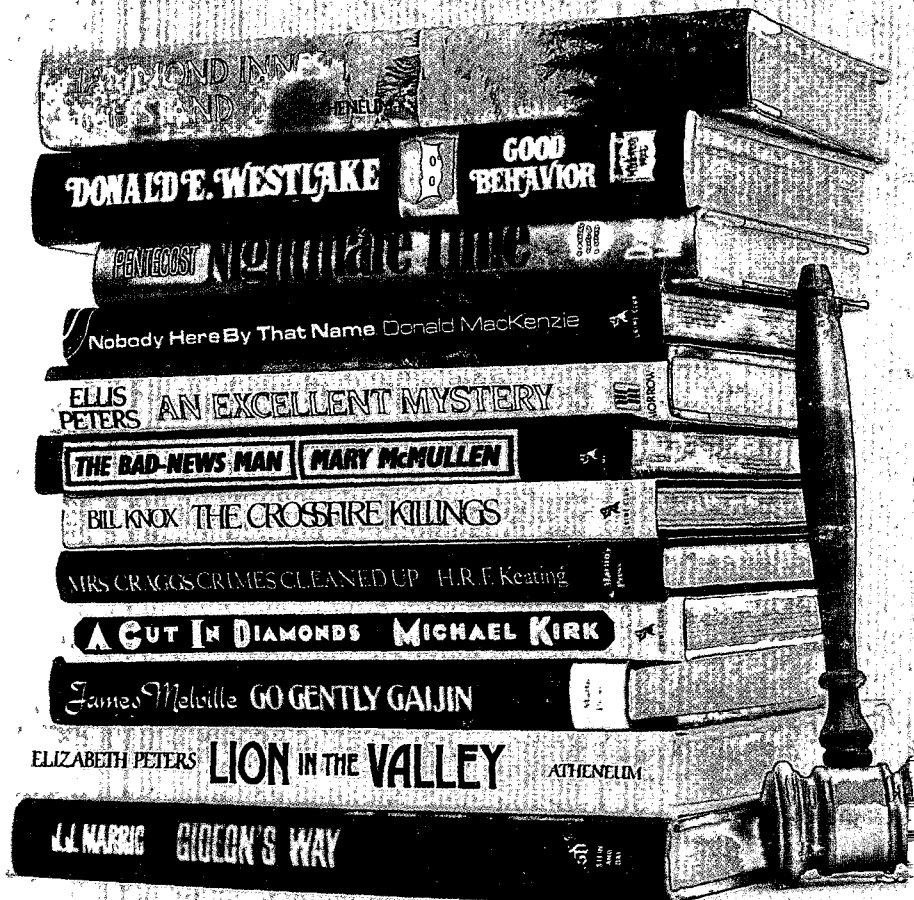
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